



## Media and the (Im)permeability of Public Sphere to Gender

Sara I. Magalhães<sup>1</sup>, Carla Cerqueira<sup>2</sup> & Mariana Bernardo<sup>3</sup>

Magalhães, S.I.; Cerqueira, C. & Bernardo, M. (2012) 'Media and the (Im)permeability of Public Sphere to Gender' in Nunes da Costa, M. (Org) *Democracia, Mass Media e Esfera Pública. Democracy, Mass Media and Public Sphere*, Vila Nova de Famalicão: Edições Húmus, pp. 35-52.

### Abstract:

We cannot continue to look at public sphere as a space of privileged, following an Habermasian logic. In this sense, an idealized definition of public sphere is created drawings upon equality opportunities and upon its intervenient rationalism, where the author clearly tries to retrieve Kantian sense of freedom. However, he focuses on male power holders and citizens' participation. Moreover, public sphere is nowadays marked by multiple positions and actors that magnify its interactions. We are particularly interested on the uses of public sphere on media by its transformative capacity and the swell of a democratic space for every individuals. The breach of this sphere and its consequent fragmentation has functioned almost paradoxically: on one hand it allows subjects to position themselves and to take a stand but, on the other hand, it reinforces *status quo*, depriving other subjects from public sphere agency. This discursive (im)permeability carried out by the media against certain groups and individuals has raised debate in many areas. Feminist critique's legacy has been extremely relevant to this public sphere conceptual evolution and reformulation, contributing to a more plural and equality conceptualization; one that is truly close to citizens and its idiosyncrasies. Feminist critique to Habermas' bourgeois public sphere comes, first of all, from the recognition of women's exclusion, as well as of other specific social groups, from figuring in society and from having an active part, therefore excluding them from democratic citizenship.

The role of media, however, does not seem easy, as it is one of the privileged vehicles for information dissemination playing an important contribution to citizenship. Yet, in this junction there are diverse social actors that intend to enroll public decision-making. We know that public opinion is shaped mainly by parameters that prioritize some discourses over others, giving them more prominence and power. By highlighting these discourses, assigning greater emphasis to certain themes and people, media equally contribute to the formation and delimitation of public sphere boundaries. In this complex relationship established, and based on a critical feminist outlook, we intend with this paper to question the existence of a single public sphere or of several ones, and to question how far are mainstream media (im)permeable to emancipatory and resistance discourses. Finally, we will question, as well, how does public sphere and democracy notions articulate themselves with the increasing individualism promotion taking place in Western societies.

**Keywords:** public sphere, democracy, media, feminist critique

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<sup>1</sup> Sara I. Magalhães – [saraisabelmagalhaes@gmail.com]

<sup>2</sup> Carla Cerqueira – [carlaprec3@gmail.com]

<sup>3</sup> Mariana Bernardo – [mbpb Bernardo@gmail.com]

“The promotion of a singular idealized form of the public sphere as normative acts to promote particular voices while marginalizing others” (Dahlberg 2005: 113)

### **Starting from the beginning: media and public sphere**

To consider public sphere is to think of media. Drawing back on the eighteenth and early nineteenth century bourgeois' saloons and coffee houses, Habermasian public sphere (1962) concept inquires people to open public discussion on matters of general interest reflecting critically upon people's and state's practices. In Habermas's conceptual formulation we could envision three different types of spheres: private sphere, a sphere of public authority and a bourgeois public sphere. It is based on the later that we will focus our reflection.

According to Paul Hodkinson (2011: 174), “the public sphere consisted of a space for the development of shared culture and ideas, located between the realm of ‘public authority’ (government) and the private realm of ‘civil society’ which encapsulated commercial relations and the domestic sphere”. Although the initial proclamation was of inclusivity and participation, it eventually ended up excluding subordinate forms of expression as they reinforced a collective parameter based on a pluralistic view that ultimately draws boundaries that marginalizes who fails to keep up. The main idea was to nurture a cohesive national culture and identity based on individuals participation in a critical political position.

Access to public sphere was, therefore, based on a public use of reason which was superior to its private use (Stevenson 1995). Thus, the dominant male capitalist class was privileged in this access as this cultural homogenization and intention of consensus in a plural society implied a hierarchy of values that ultimately generates domination, power inequalities and exclusion. As Lister (1991) and Pateman (1989) had already pointed out “the assumption of sameness seems to have an inbuilt tendency to be insensitive to the needs of women” (in Stevenson 1995: 72). In fact, as sustained by Silva (2002) Habermas's theoretical categories don't properly account for gender issues being therefore ineffective to analyze women's exclusion of the bourgeois public sphere and how this exclusion is implicated on the sexual split between public and private. Therefore, this idea of inclusion must articulate forms of democratic dialogue that allow participants' transformation changing not only the understandings they have on themselves but also of their and others interests'; this action is important to create legitimate bases to a democratic consensus around common vindications (Silveirinha 2005).

Another important contribute to the concept establishment, despite these exclusions, was the implementation and dissemination of a newspaper industry that worked on the critiques and the politically oriented debates widening the discussion. Media, and newspapers in particular at the time, contributed then as facilitators and

even becoming determinants as opinion makers. Actually Habermas considers the press and newspapers industry as a mean to the refeudalization of the public sphere – being the interpenetration of the public and the private. Through the evolution of this industry, from profit maximization, focus on information and opinion and ultimately the degeneration of journalism and public sphere into a commercial journalism, we would review our approach to public sphere (Silva 2002). According to Habermas is through language that we can guarantee power legitimacy (*idem*). Conceição Nogueira (2001) agrees that social discourses are a fundamental element in constructing and deconstructing social relations allowing social transformation through the articulation of several different subject positions, linguistically produced.

Our goal with this paper is then to question the existence of a public sphere (or several ones), trying to perspective the way in which media are (im)permeable to emancipator and resistance discourses, articulating notions as public sphere, democracy and citizenship with the increased promotion of individualism that is taking place in occidental societies.

### **Gazing at media**

Media accomplished a major role in the development and sustainability of a public culture allowing public sphere to take place as they stimulated and informed the debates, represented public opinion acting as active and inclusive discussion forums, and nurtured a sense of belonging and community contributing to cultural cohesion (Hodkinson 2011). In fact, media usually act as an important forum to identity movements, enabling them to position themselves and their goals in public sphere (Silveirinha 2002). This identity [positions] should then be constructed beyond the symbolic reference of the masculine/feminine binomial (Martins 2005).

However, the increasing commercialization of media, in late nineteenth and early twentieth century, resulted in media globalization and in its consequent fragmentation (Correia 2004). With media globalization an increasingly overt influence of political and economical power rose in media contents, shaping the agenda setting and determining which themes and positions were to be approached. In fact, as the themes became more international rather than national, as conceived in Habermas's initial concept, this new agenda valued political and economical contents over public reasoning. Eventually, this decision determined an increasing distance and detachment from women. Actually, political and economical issues were considered rational, and therefore men's issues, contrasting with more social and cultural themes considered more emotional and therefore associated with femininity (Stevenson 1995).

As Stevenson (1995) points out it seems clearly that all formulation had gone beyond Habermas's initial considerations. The author was mainly concerned with communicative rationality as a product of printed media/culture; the inclusion of an electronic culture added velocity and fragmented it to its rupture. Verstraeten (1996), however, argues against the interpretation of a rise and subsequent fall of public sphere, considering that it is still to be achieved (Devereux 2007). In his perspective "it would be extremely naïve to assume that in our conflict-laden and dual society, an ideal-typical

neutral public sphere, belonging as it were to everyone, would emerge” (Verstraeten 1996: 357-8). The author continues asking whose public sphere we are considering; this characterization of its main subjects is determinant to understand the path this formulation has gone through.

Much of the changes were being accounted due to a gradual and more and more significant media ownership. “Those who are critical of these changes in the structure of media ownership are concerned, in the main, about the ideological implications of such developments” (Devereux 2007: 92). As a consequence there was a reification of an hegemonic male privilege that deprived women, mainly from the discourses generated. There was an evident gender bias that has been gradually overcome as new media genres were developed and some niche media tried to reach out to a more feminine audience. In consequence, the concentration and narrowing of the range of voices heard within media settings resulted in increasing contraction of public sphere, rise of ‘infotainment’, decline of critical investigative journalism, casualization of much media work and the homogenizing tendencies inherent in media globalization (*idem*).

Due to this relationship with media and communication, and its rapid readjustments to contemporary society, there was a need to re-signify the public sphere concept. As Hodkinson (2011: 180) puts it: “the increasing domination of society by markets, the state and instrumental reason were deemed to have undermined Habermas’s vision of a genuinely free, critical and inclusive space characterized by informed and rational public discussion”. Actually, for Habermas, market’s influence is a dual and contradictory process that can, at the same time, serve as emancipator and as dominative with different consequences and unpredictable implications (Stevenson 1995).

Contemporary perspectives on public sphere emphasize now the social transformational potential and the rise of democratic space. Actually, “contemporary media cultures are characterized by the progressive privatization of the citizenry and the trivialization and glamorization of questions of public concern and interest” (Stevenson 1995: 50). By this, Stevenson means that we could delimitate a focus change in public sphere perspective leaving the political domination and re-centering on a imposed ideological consensus based on economic and political manipulation (*idem*). In this sense, human relationships tend to turn out to be less affectionate, to the extent of, sometimes, losing their citizenry and ending up to be represented by numbers (Évora, 2011). Silvino Évora (2011: 56) continues by stating that “it is in this context that news’ and other tangible goods’ mercantilization arises, adulterating culture’s essence (...) transforming the public space into a commercial space and society into a giant market”. In sum, the growth of the gap between public and private life is mainly a consequence of a replacement of private communicative individuals by plural corporative and commercialized interests. As Braumann and Sousa (2005: 810) highlight:

“the study of communication and media is not, indeed, thinkable without the attempt of understanding the market structures and its articulations with public sphere, without questioning

companies' and actors' property that control markets in the so called free societies, without the careful analysis of the tendencies and countertendencies, strengths and tensions that systematically reorganize the communicational power from which public spheres are dependent on”.

Actually, media evolve nowadays on a global dimension assuming by default the constant and dynamic change of settings. This background is assumed to assure a more accurate, “real” and proxy news making and information. However, at the same time it causes the escalation of complexity, multiplying and amplifying the multiple public spheres.

In fact, there is a need for a broader and more complex approach that acknowledges a dialectic and hybrid relation between emotion and rationality, within a discourse that “questions the masculine/feminine dualism, which should not only allow substantial ethical positions but also a continued analysis of its political effects” (Blackmore 1999: 56). As Macedo and Santos (2009) explains, it is important to be reflexive upon women limitations considering both private and public sphere. Actually, there is a need to rethink these spheres and their inter-connections (Silveirinha 2002), at different levels implying a “de-genderization of public-private division meanings, (...), the awareness of its interactions (...) and the acknowledgement of its fluid and political nature” (Lister 1999: 143 in Macedo & Santos 2009: 150).

### **Where does gender fits?**

When you think of collective and corporative interests you have to perspective the invisibility and the submission of some people, opinion and interests. That is what had happen with gender. As Calhoun (1992: 3) reminds us, “the early bourgeois public sphere were composed of narrow segments of the European population, mainly educated, propertied men, and they conducted a discourse not only exclusive of others but prejudicial to the interests of those excluded”. Habermas’s formulation deprived women from a rational reasoning which automatically excluded them from public sphere. Later developments did not alter the access to public domain and continued to let women at a side.

As stated by Mak and Waaldijk (2007: 217),

“gender historians have been pointing out that the gender specific distinction and opposition between private life and public sphere is not at all times, but is typical indeed for Western societies in the XIX<sup>th</sup> and XX<sup>th</sup> century. This had to do with the rise and growth of industrial capitalism. The division between production (in the factory) and

consumption (in the family) condemned many women to an existence of housewife and mother”.

This social representation led to a rigid, stereotyped and monolithic image of women by opposing them to men. A representation in which the male is confused with the universal (Amâncio 1994) and the feminine “transforms women into an invisible community of (over)sexual, hopelessly different than men, confusing difference between sexes with difference itself” (Amâncio 2003: 703). The gender bias resulted then in a critical position and action taking in order to re-conquer agency toward the *status quo*. This has been feminist’s media research main focus. Accordingly to Maria João Silveirinha (1997), initially we could split this area of research in feminist media studies and public sphere research.

Feminist theorists like Nancy Fraser, Seyla Benhabib, Iris Marion Young, Mary Ryan, Carole Patman or Joan Landes tried to point all constitutive exclusions that resulted from the public sphere implementation; they argued for that the idea of a coherent, homogeneous public sphere that could unify itself according to individuals on idiosyncrasies. They were especially critical not only on the real exclusion of women from the public sphere but also on the fact that Habermas did not took this exclusion into critical consideration (*idem*). The feminist project considered then essential to look at public sphere, or multiple public spheres, as a mean to celebrate and integrate differences and individual diversity into a normative project that legitimates democracy through a more particular and individual approach contrasting with the collective cohesion proposed.

According to Nancy Fraser (1990: 77) “an adequate conception of the public sphere requires not merely bracketing, but rather the elimination, of social inequality”. In this sense, the author considers that having a multiplicity of public spheres is more adequate than a single one that cannot respond and represent the existing diversity. She, further, considers that some of the considered “private” issues should be brought to light into a more accepting and inclusive public sphere. In this way, the proposal is to go beyond the boundaries of strong and weak publics and its interconnection to look a new state of a “post-bourgeois” (*idem*) conception of public sphere. This is based on the assumption that gender, race, ethnical background, age, class or sexual orientation cannot be ignored and merged into a homogeneous totality – a long time feminist research issue that is nowadays organized into the intersectional theory. Intersectionality perspective, according to Shields (2008: 301) “reveals that the individual’s social identities profoundly influence one’s beliefs about and experience of gender”. Feminist researchers have therefore been captivated by this perspective as it locates individuals in their own social environment in relation to others identities and positions. Gender issues, for instance, should be seen and embedded of social and power relations (*idem*). Social diversity must then be considered into the global democratic project in order to assure the sense of belonging and community contributing to a major social organization.

In this sense, it is not primarily about what is private or public but about its allocation and the consequences and limitations that results from this binary and

dualistic approach, namely the reification of women's oppression, exploitation and redrawn from political agency. This institutional isolation reinforces inequalities and persistent subjugation of women's subject positions to a privileged male pattern. As states Silveirinha (1997: 3), to take this perspective on media analysis is "to walk on parallel paths that are not always convergent, that still is crossed not only by the same problematic [as feminist media studies] but also the same difficulties and tensions around a collective identity formation that, as Melucci shows, produces orientations and meanings that social actors acknowledge in democracy".

Later developments led Silveirinha to reorganize its proposal. In this sense, today we assume that feminist media research can be organized in three major areas: content representation; media producers and institutions; audience, reception and identities (Silveirinha 2004, 2006). If the first showed a simplistic perspective of this problematic, posterior research endeavored on the conjugation of power structures analysis, focusing on representation policies and knowledge production originating "a more complex analysis of the structure and process of representation, of cultural and economic structures that support it, of social relations that produce a gendered discourse and of the nature of the gendered identity" (Gallagher 2006: 2). Feminist media studies have therefore contributed to the significant change that occurred, over past decades, in audience-media relationship (Magalhães *et al.* 2011), focusing attention on the dualistic representation based on power inequalities that persist dominant in a globalized media age. As Lobo & Cabecinhas (2010: 339) pointed out, "women participation in public life is a key ingredient in the discussion of gender, social justice and human rights". However, we must not forget that all changes accomplished by feminist movement revealed themselves not to be enough to ensure a more inclusive participation in practice (Fraser 1990, 1992; Gill 1993, 2011).

In this sense, media can be considered (im)permeable to minority groups, from which we could highlight feminism and women's movement. Research has shown that these minority groups create conflicts as they propose alternatives to instituted norms and the *status quo* (Moscovici 1985). As argued by Vernet and collaborators (2009), research on social influence has shown that minority groups are often victims of social cryptomnesia. According to the research team, social cryptomnesia is the "phenomenon in which people's acceptance of values promoted by minorities is very often accompanied by an oblivion to the role played by minority groups, resulting in effect in the perpetuation of a negative image of minority groups" (Vernet *et al.* 2009: 130). In this sense, this social phenomenon points to a collective effort on containing feminists' social contribution with the clear intention of maintaining social control (*idem*).

Therefore, the inclusion of a more diverse perspective and the increasing conglomeration of media has been threatening democratic, free dialogue and debate, and in this sense a monolithic version of public sphere. As Esteves (2010: 35-6) reminds us,

"to women, inclusion is about its relation with public sphere in a double groundwork. On one side, public sphere is the instrument that allows them to reclaim and to promote (more) inclusive politics

(...) that implied structural changes in a political and social level. On the other side, the problem with inclusion is also on women's relation with the public space, as it is there that participation takes place, in a social relationship framework more or less informal that take place on civil society".

In sum, media have been at the core preoccupations of feminists following Tuchman's 'women symbolic annihilation' (1978/2004) as they were underrepresented, invisible or often misrepresented in media.

### **Looking at gender and going beyond women**

We can now understand that media could function as an important instrument of intercommunication reflecting the plurality of social reflection centers or multiple public spheres (Silva 2002) as it allows information diffusion as well as its feedback functioning in a bidirectional flow. Even considering media as part of a *consumer culture* it is important to assure the level of discourse in opinion making without restraining audience critical communicative freedom.

Since feminist early works that this theme of media and discourses and its relation to gender representation has been in focus. The concepts of the public and the private are an inextricable part of the language we use as social and political actors - they are part of the conceptual architecture through which we live our lives as social and political beings (Thompson 2011: 51). Considering language as non neutral medium of constructing the world it is important to be aware of the impact of its formulation on subject's positions, power relations and resistance.

Habermas's concept of public sphere was from its starting point language exclusive. As acknowledge, feminists consider important to attend to language inequalities and invisibilities as they reinforce power asymmetries based on sexual and gender distinctions. Once people could access to public sphere only through informed and rational public discussion and that this characteristics were limited to white male middle class, feminist critique to public sphere focused mainly, as explored before, in the acknowledgment of women's exclusion from this concept. A more plural notion of citizenship rose from a new approach to inclusion and social justice with identity and difference politics, the so called 'autonomous public spheres' (Esteves 2010). The author (2010) argues that full participation in the public sphere is a question of social justice, of contributing to a more just and egalitarian society.

The main critique addressed is then to the homogeneity described by Habermas. There was a need of conceptual reconfiguration toward not one but several public spheres. As Peça (2010: 23) states, "feminist critique have drawn our attention to the fragility that homogenization and the inability to recognize the plurality of voices and vindications that answer to specific needs" and their subject's positions. In this sense, "it may be more appropriate to think in terms of a range of public spheres that appeal to different kinds of audience members rather than a single public sphere" (Devereux



2007: 107). A re-conceptualization of the notion of public sphere is then needed starting by identifying the constitutive character of some exclusions to the institutionalization of these (rigid) relationships. We could, then, envision a lack of set boundaries.

### **Room for citizenship and equality – resistance and empowerment on media**

We cannot deny the crescent influence of media in everyday life, in individuals and in communities' life. From Silveirinha's perspective (2002: 14) "in contemporary public space, messages are plural, walking diverse institutionalized and informal power nodules, locating themselves in a inters-subjectivity network that cannot be reduced to a single community or single discourse".

Actually, according to Castells (2007), our main social battle implies conquering citizens' mind and conscience as what people think implies the social construction of reality, their power relations and the relations that sustain societies at the same time that they contest, resist and deconstruct institutional power. Therefore, it is important to highlight that across a variety of media genres we are constantly faced with a wide range of representations about gender that expand exponentially the significant role media acquired in shaping our perceptions of what it is to be 'male' or 'female'. Following Devereux's (2007: 205) resume on research, "media representations of gender has focused on how women are objectified and exploited in a media context (especially in advertising and in pornography) and on the gap between social reality and media constructions of femininity and masculinity". In this limbo: traditional mode of distinguishing private from public legitimizes women's oppression. According to Esteves (2003), in what concerns to public sphere, media can act as "administration and control devices" or as "means of social resistance"; it is in the later that emancipation movements and empowerment social groups has been targeted for 'symbolic annihilation' (Tuchman 1978/2004).

In fact, media have the ability to prioritize social contents conditioning the agenda and which themes are visible or invisible at the public sphere (Cerqueira *et al.* 2011). As Hodkinson (2011: 176) remembers us "in the ongoing provision of information and outlining of opinion, media must be highly responsive, reflecting the range of developments in public culture and opinion rather than imposing an elite agenda". Innerarity (2010) argues that it is possible to re-conceptualize the democracy ideal from a (or several) public sphere(s) perspective. In this attempt the "pre-eminence of values that constitute the collective dimension in face of particular interests that value the political over the economic and communication over market" (*idem*: 13).

When considering feminism and gender inequalities it is not only about the way women are represented but also the role media have in political life and where discrepant discourses in democracy take place. It all comes up to a theory of citizenship. According to Stevenson (1995: 72), a "theory of citizenship should recognize universal needs and interests while closely attending to forms of difference that do not violate generalized needs and obligations". Beyond a neutral and empty space, the public sphere is differentiated by cultural identities of not just private individuals but unique

social and institutional presences (Silveirinha 2010). However, it is possible to identify in this theory of citizenship some problematic issues. Stevenson (1995: 69) pointed three of them within Habermas's approach that summarize our ongoing debate. First, there is a need to definitely "recognize that communicative action could be subject to certain limits"; there is also need to become "more specific as regards the relation between direct and representative democracy"; and ultimately there is a need to "theoretically revise its universalistic orientation in order to account for difference." Actually, this was Habermas human emancipator project as the author considered that this project was dependent on each one's personal ability to participate rationally in the debate arguing for matters of significance to the community (Hodkinson 2011). As Silveirinha (2005: 7) reminds us "deliberate democracy implies a political decision taking based on the trade of reasons and arguments, in a process in which all citizens participate, going beyond their personal interests and points of view, in order to reflect upon a greater good". This implies questioning social equality as a non essential condition to a truly fair democratic regime, that this regime is not based upon multiple public spheres and that public sphere should restrain itself to general interest issues ending all public versus private distinctions. According to Filipe Silva (2002) we should review three aspects. First, the repercussions of the tendencies to organize the capitalist production and to the State interventionism in the public sphere; Second, the consequences of these phenomenon on audience structure and on public sphere itself; And finally, the influence of these tendencies in the masses democratic legitimization process.

This is the challenge one must face when trying to include women and terminate an exclusion suffered that cannot be held unrelated to other exclusions. There is need of new empowerment forms, new goals, new political fights that enable a general appropriation of a common relevant issue allowing a political and economical control, democratic transparency and accountability (Benhabib 2006 in Esteves 2010: 52-3). In sum, "the political reordering of these spheres is dependent upon the universal application of the principle of equality that is sensitive to difference" (Stevenson 1995: 73).

We ought to allow the emergence of new and less instrumental subject positions. At the same time, we should enforce alternative and complementary ways of placing the problematic in the public domain which are not dependent on traditional media gatekeepers filters. Esteves (2003: 199) argues that "internet may present itself as a decisive transformation factor of the current social communication situation, by unlocking a certain imprisonment (deflation) that traditional mass media impose on individuality and subjective affirmation by making more fluid social relations' networks and creating more propitious conditions to inter-subjective practices". Many authors have begun to lift this complex veil. In the specific case of blogosphere, Catarina Rodrigues (2006: 4) says, for instance, that

"it seems to us that blogs do not replace nor journalism nor the traditional media, but the truth is that they are making them change. They seem to expand the media universe. They allow any citizen

to participate on fragmented public space and to exchange views about a particular subject”.

These possibilities are particularly relevant to social movements that are built on a logic of resistance and that act as counter-powers to the mainstream media public sphere. We will discuss here the emergence and growth of digital information channels that make possible a diversity of voices that was unthinkable before. It is not clear, however, to what extent are the channels responsible for reconvert the logical or if they are contaminated by the reproduction of gender inequalities (Cerqueira *et al.* 2009). Therefore, attention should be given to these new means of communication, dissemination and publicity of several groups where identity paradigms are built and which are often relegated to the background, but without “immediately transforming the phantasmagoric public space in a resplendent one” (Esteves 2003: 199). The impermeable web that has characterized the public sphere seems to begin to yield to gender problematic. In sum, “classical bourgeois public sphere is now within a more abstract and theoretical concept, communicative action, with the promise of mutual understanding as social action way of coordination” (Silva 2002: 101). Communicative action intents therefore to reach propositional truth, normative justice and subjective sincerity as a way to reach the Habermas’ s proposed “worlds” or levels of reality: the objective, the social and the subjective (*idem*). Communication action is, hence, more than communication itself. It accounts for “a type of interaction that is coordinated through speech acts and does not coincide with them” (Habermas, 1981: 101). We can, therefore, question. Will this be a superficial or a substantial change? What is the impact of these new discourses in the citizen’s life? How does the different forces that try to raise from darkness intersect in its way to achieve visibility?

Once the unitarian perspective is deprecated in face of a multiform conception, even though linguistically united, we can envision Habermas’s project. Actually his later works have been evolving towards a more broadening perspective, leaving behind the elitist perspective once enunciated in the bourgeois public sphere concept. His developments on communicative action theory leads us to actually realizing that there is a need of a highly differentiated network of public spheres where boundaries are, by definition, “permeable; each public sphere is open to others public spheres” (Habermas, 1985: 329).

## Note

This paper was developed under the scope of the research project “Gender in focus: social representations in Portuguese generalist newsmagazines [Género em foco: representações sociais nas revistas portuguesas de informação generalista]” (PTDC/CCI-COM/114182/2009) funded by FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (Portuguese Science and Technology Foundation). Project website: <http://www.lasics.uminho.pt/genfoc>

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