

# Late, Lost, or Renewed? A Search for the Public Sphere in Public Libraries

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Good afternoon. My name is Michael Widdersheim. I am a PhD candidate at the University of Pittsburgh in the United States. The title of this presentation is “Late, lost or renewed? A search for the public sphere in public libraries.”

## Presentation outline

- Describe what the public sphere is
- Overview literature related to the public sphere and public libraries
- Identify and describe problems in this literature
- Recommend ways to overcome these problems
- Questions and discussion

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In this presentation I will discuss what the public sphere is, I will argue that it is a concept that is central to research about public libraries internationally, that it has been so for some time. I will also argue that this association between the public sphere and public libraries, when made carelessly, is problematic. I'll explain why it can be problematic, and, in the end, I will propose ways to overcome the problems.

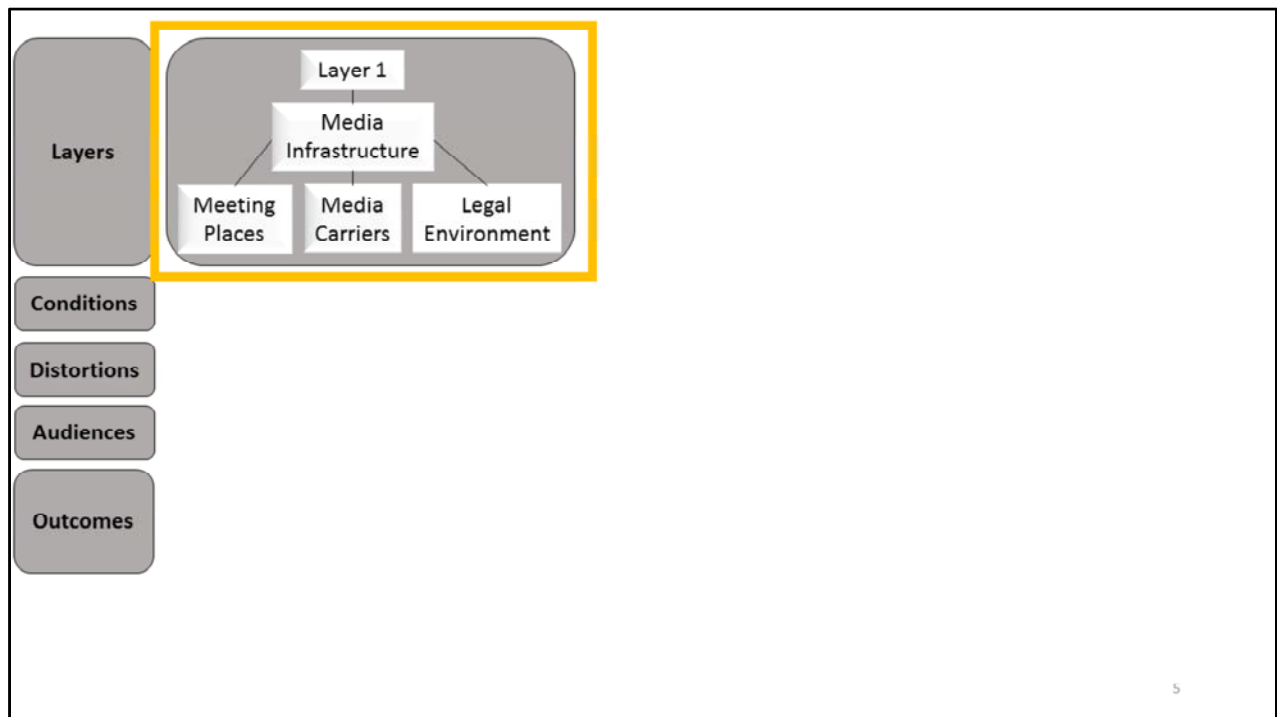
## The public sphere defined

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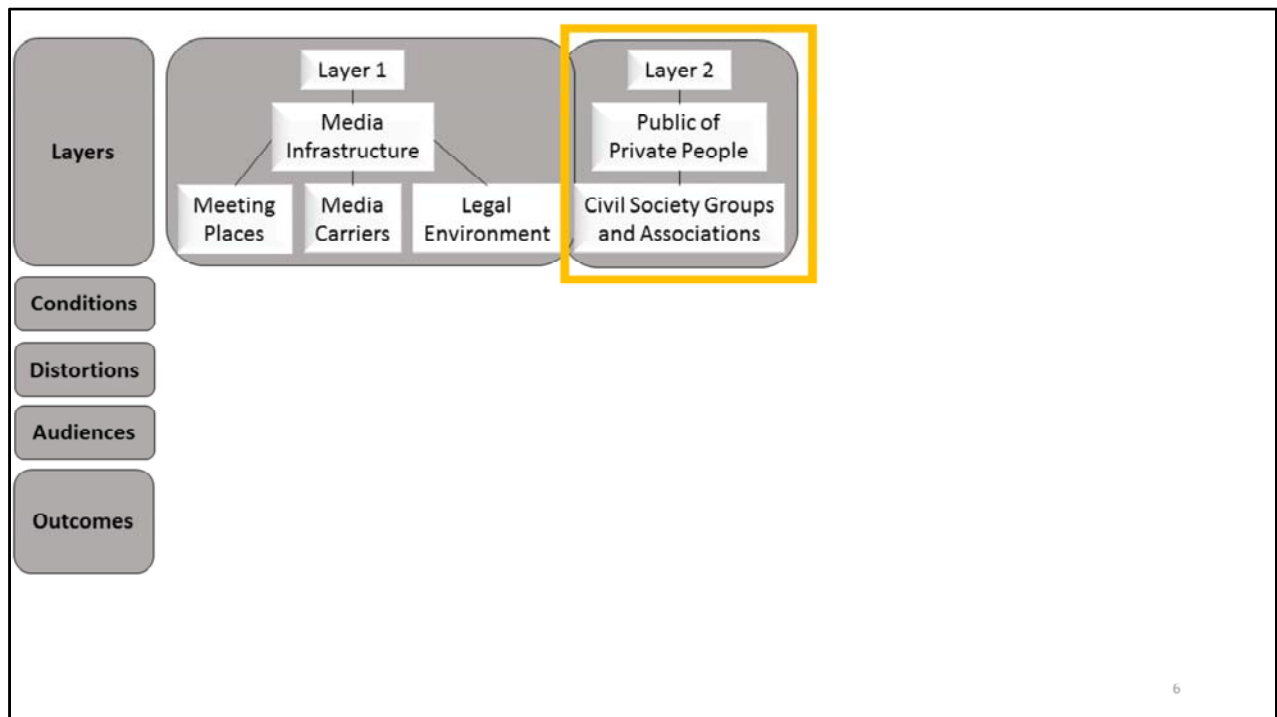
The public sphere – what is it?



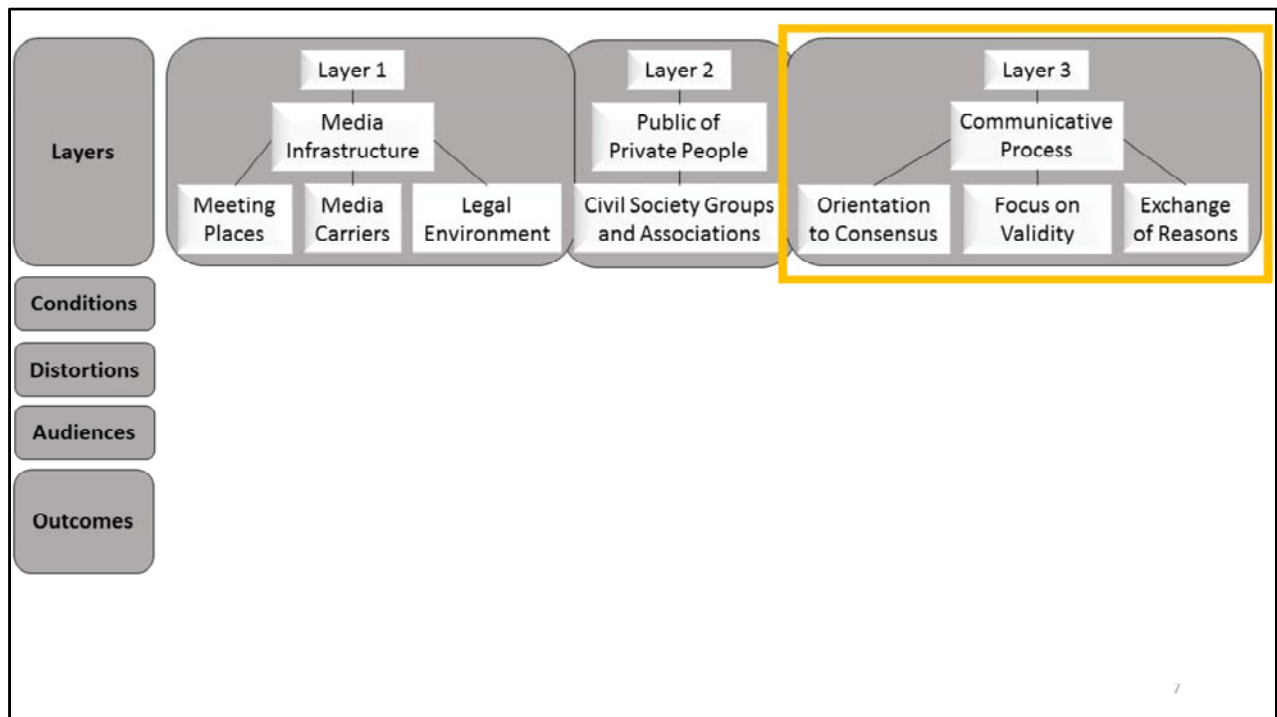
The public sphere, as I use the term, refers to open and undistorted communication with an emphasis on the give and take of reasons. But let's be a bit more specific than that. I see the public sphere as composed of 5 components: these are what I call its layers, its conditions, its distortions, its audiences, and its outcomes. I'll explain what these are.



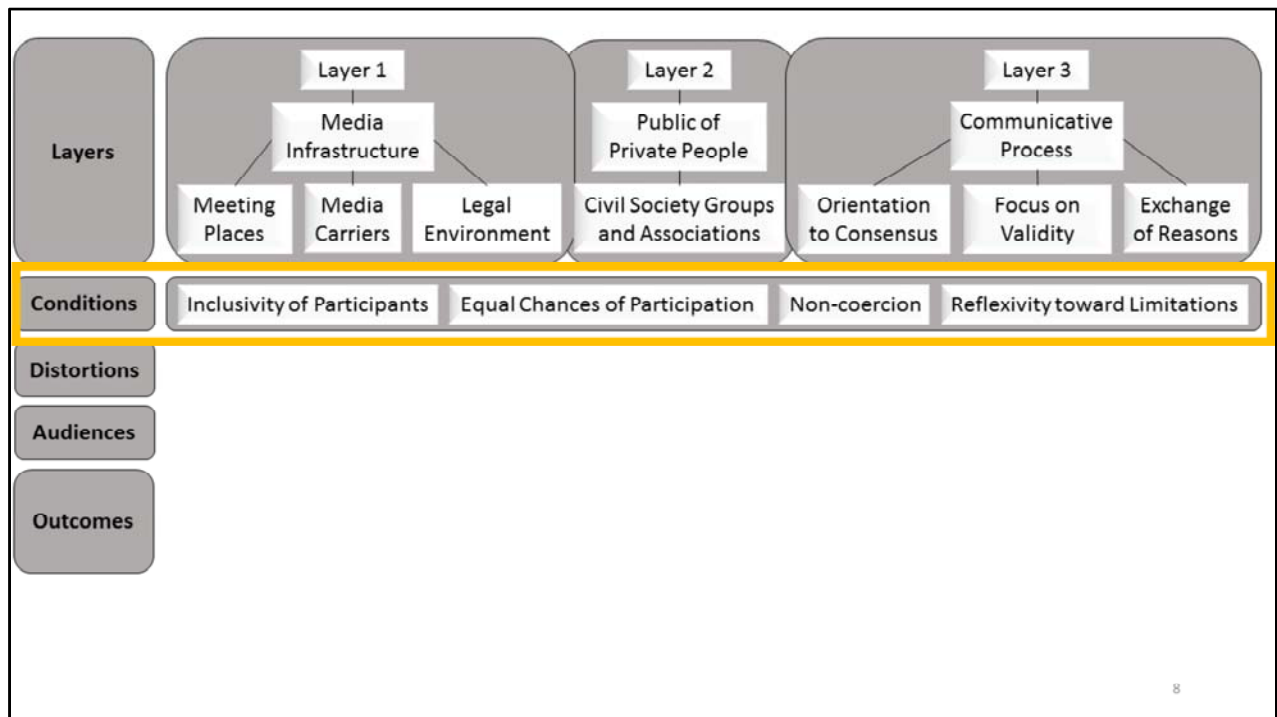
There are three layers of the public sphere. The first layer is what I call media infrastructure. Media infrastructure includes the physical and virtual meeting places, the media carriers, and the legal environment that makes public sphere communication possible.



The next layer of the public sphere is the people who compose it: civil society groups and associations, private people, the actual people doing the communicating.

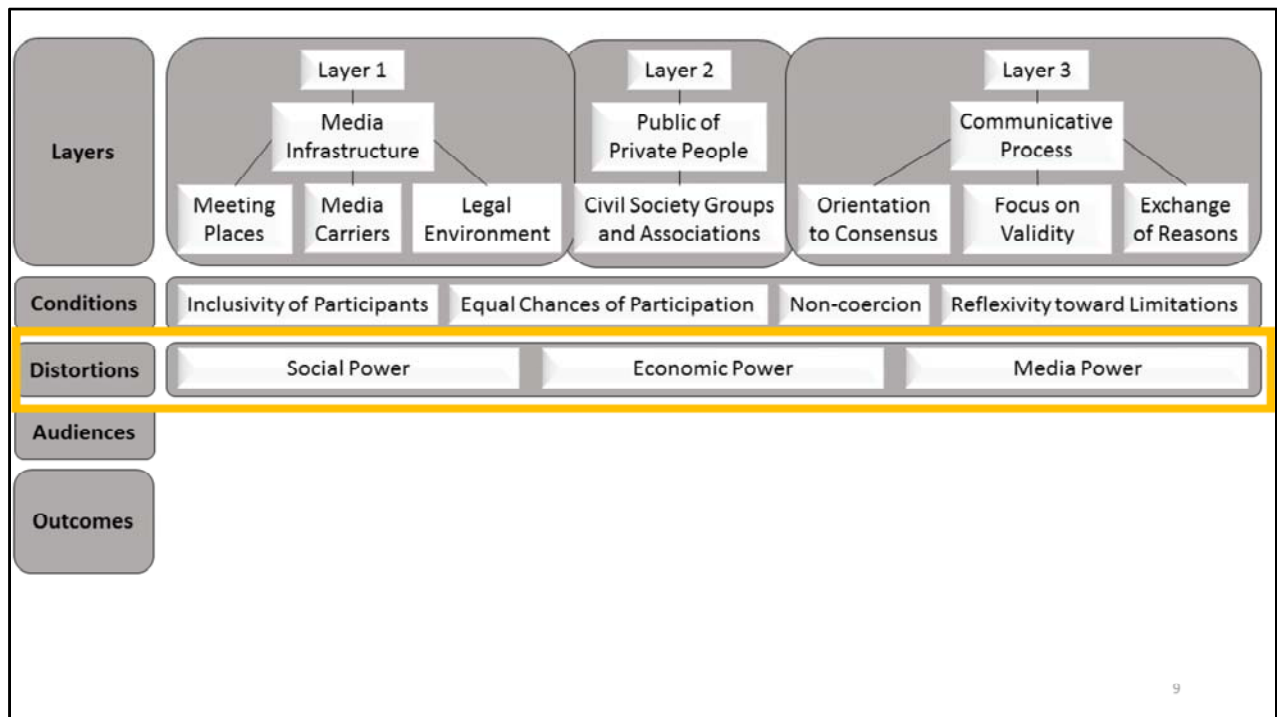


The third layer is the communicative process, the symbolic exchange of meaning between people using media infrastructures. This symbolic exchange is characterized by an orientation to consensus, a focus on validity in terms of truth, sincerity, and rightness, and the exchange of reasons for and against proposed validity statements.

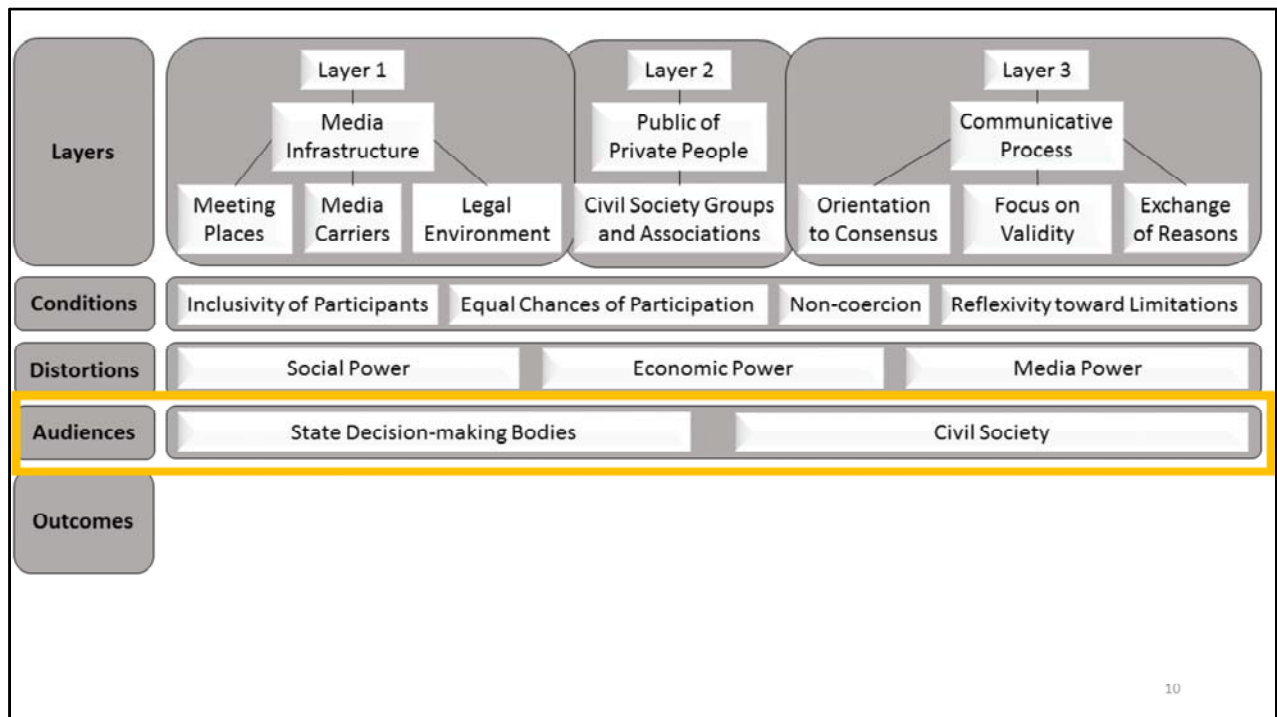


Next are the conditions of the public sphere. There are several conditions for public sphere communication. All of these conditions touch on different aspects of the notion of “openness.” They are inclusivity of participants, equal chances of participation, non-coercion by power and money, and reflexivity toward the conditions of communication.

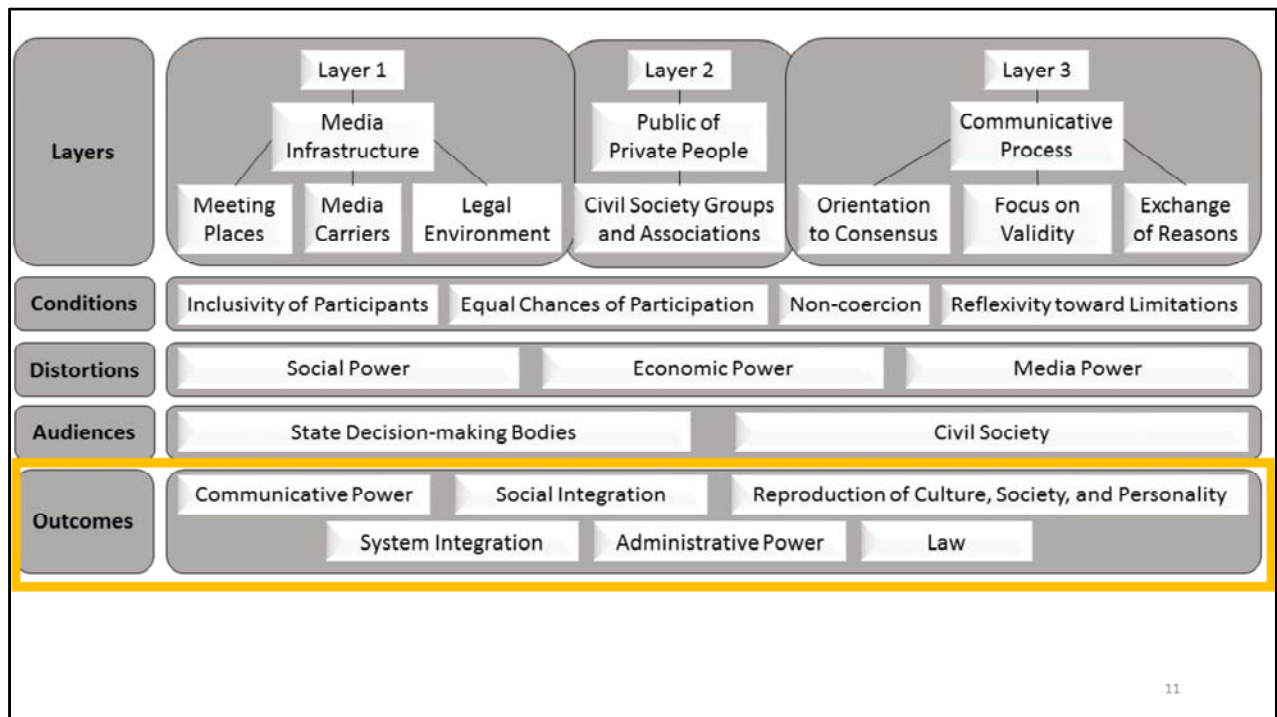




Of course, while people may strive to be open and non-coercive, no communication is without potential biases. These distortions come in several forms including social power, economic power, and media power. Social power is that which uses status or hierarchy to orient behaviors based on possible consequences. Economic power influences communication through money. And media power refers to the types of news, information, and participation that are privileged by mass media.



Public spheres can have different audiences. In some cases, the intended audiences of the communication are decision-making bodies: parliament, juries, executive boards. In this case, public sphere communication affects policies and decisions. In other cases, the audience of public sphere communication is civil society itself, it is where culture criticism takes place.



The final component of the public sphere is outcomes. By outcomes, I mean the “spillovers” or “positive externalities” of open communication, the types of social values that are generated through processes of public sphere communication. These include the generation of communicative power that travels to decision-making bodies, social integration through the production of a shared sense of identity or solidarity; the reproduction of culture, norms, and personality through the shared use of language and symbols; system integration, or the integration of people into functional systems of society; and the production of administrative power and law through which actions can be coordinated at large scale over distance and time.

## The public sphere in library literature

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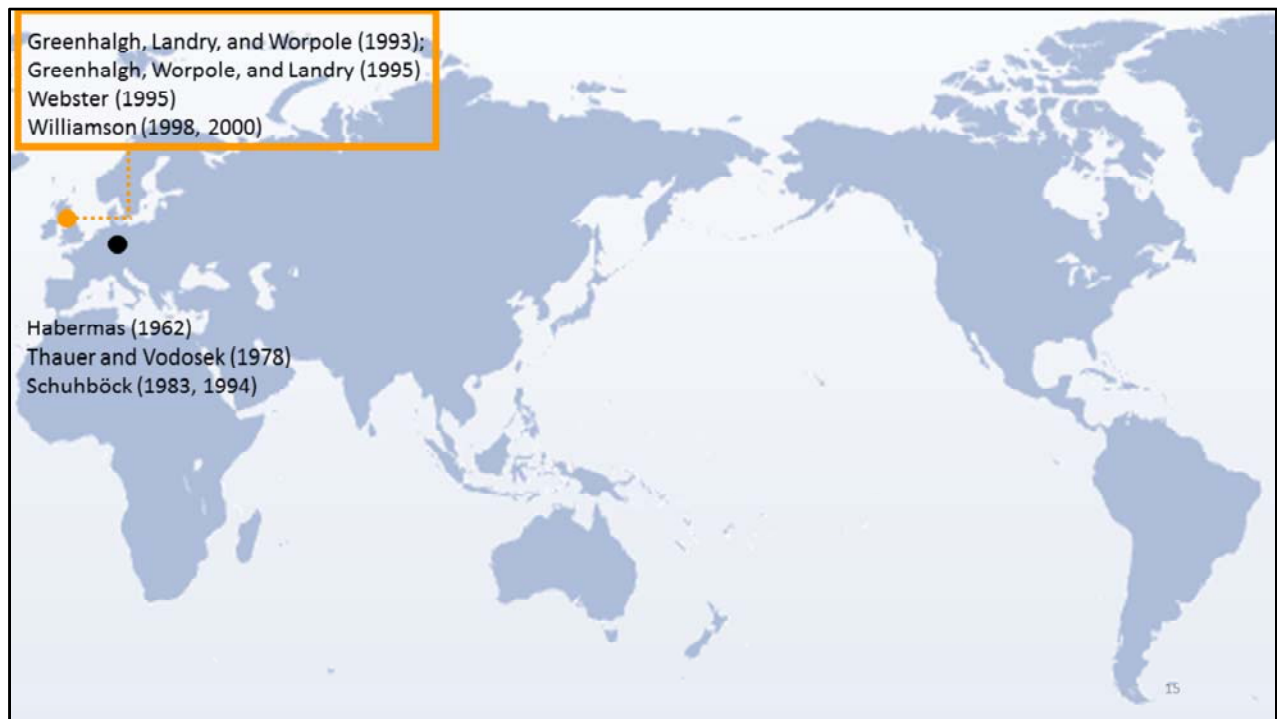
What has been said about the public sphere in library literature to date?



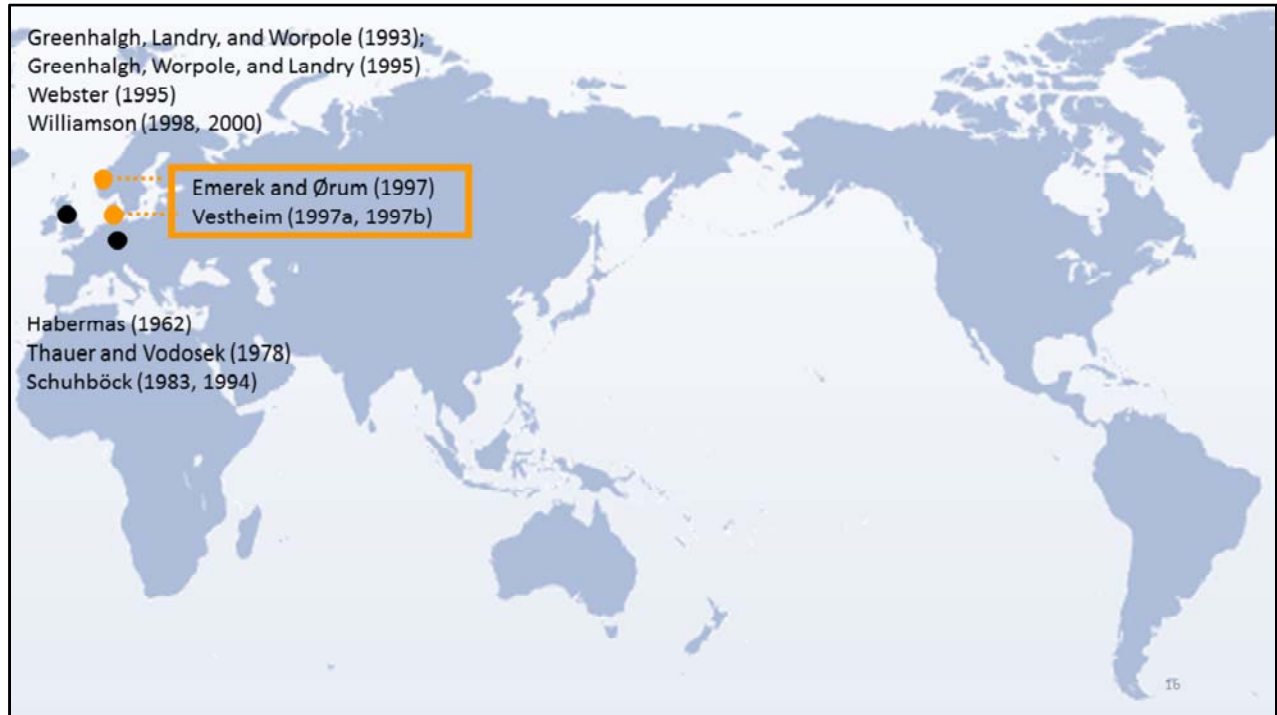
Here we have a world map with the Pacific at the center. I will show how the association of public libraries with some notion of the public sphere has been a latent but sustained research topic internationally for several decades.



The association between the public sphere and libraries was first established in 1962 with the publication of Habermas's "Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere" in German. The association was discussed in a limited way in Germany the 1980s and 1990s.

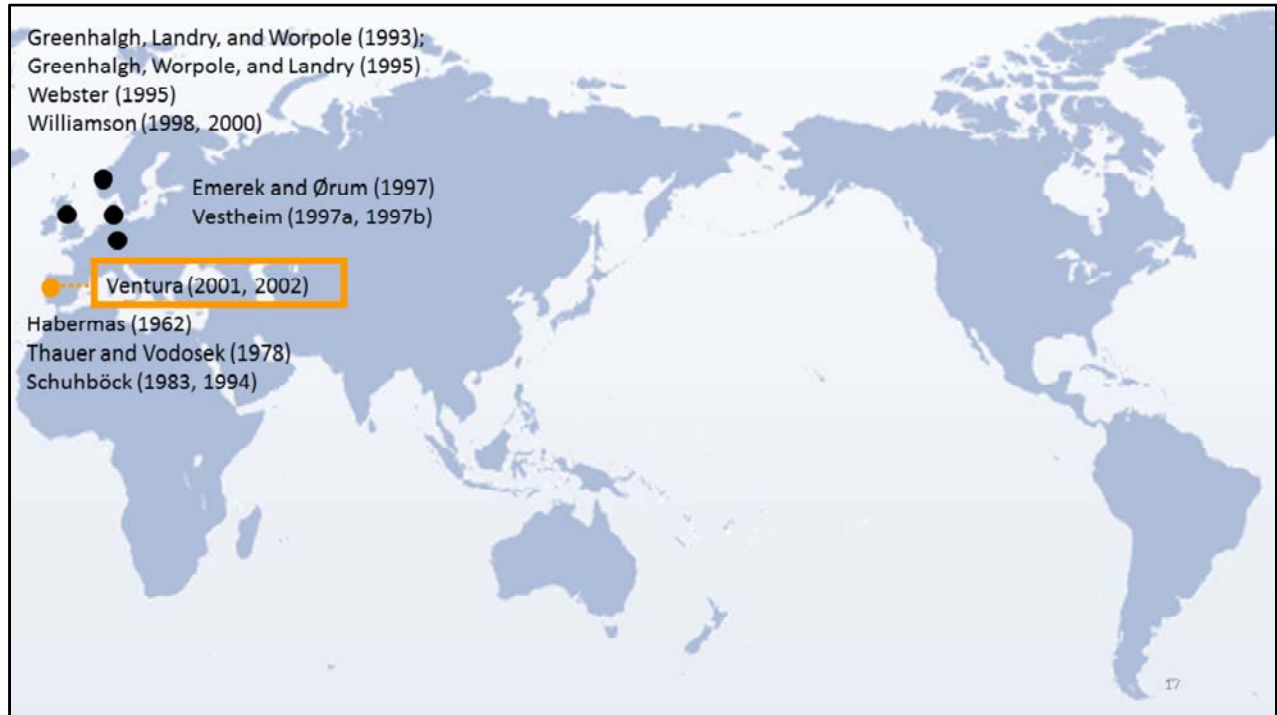


Associations then appeared in the UK in the 1990s, after the publication of “structural transformation” in English in 1989.

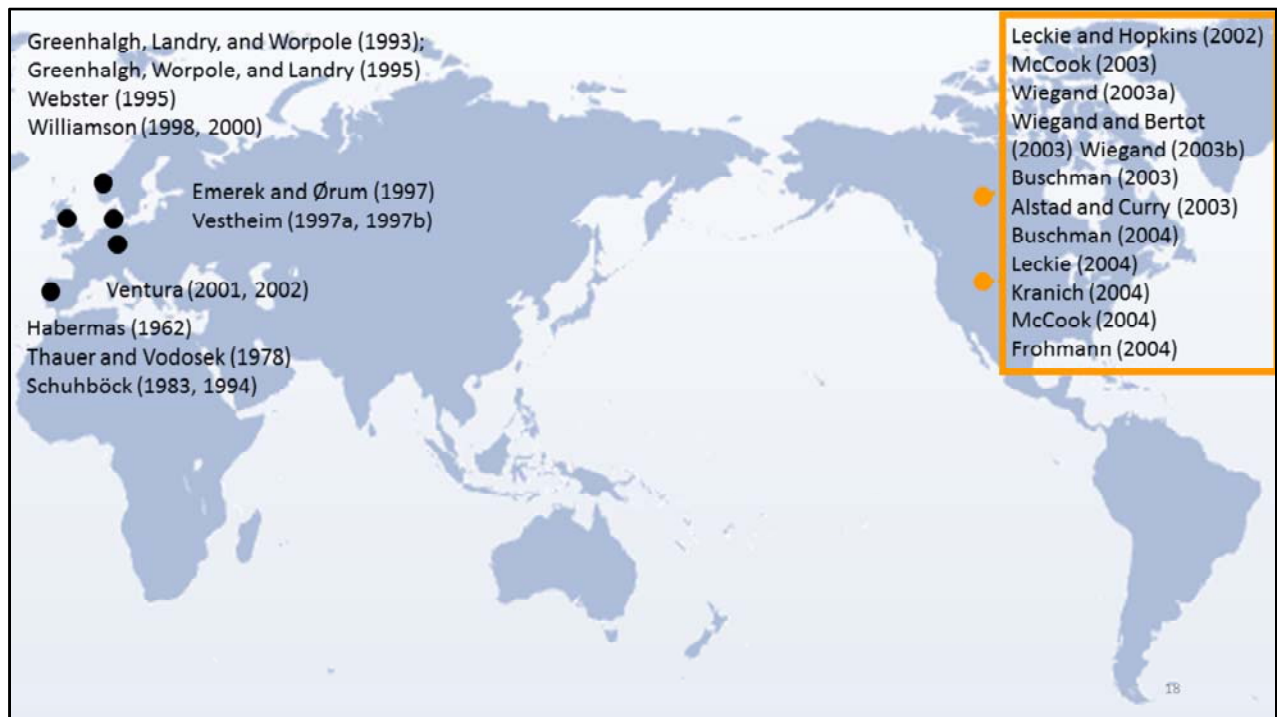


The discussion was furthered by research about libraries in Denmark and Norway.

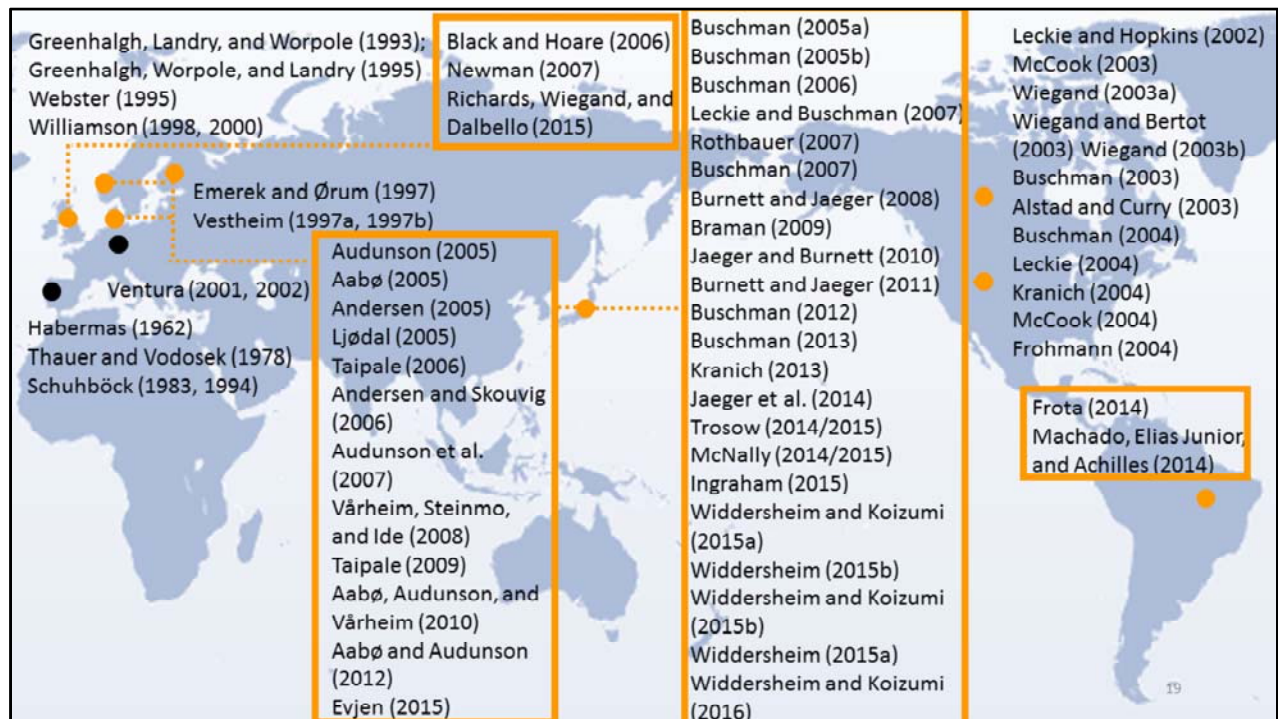




Contributions were also made in Portugal in the early 2000s.



Interest in the public sphere and libraries, especially public libraries, continued in North America in the early 2000s, prompted by readings of Habermas and also Webster (1995) of the UK.



From 2005 onward, the conversation continued to grow, and has continued on to today. Researchers from Brazil and Japan have also become interested in the topic. Since 1962, there have been over 60 books, articles, or chapters that have associated the public sphere with public libraries. For this reason I believe that the topic of public sphere and libraries is an important one and one that deserves further attention in the LIS field.

## Literature overview

- Public libraries are public sphere infrastructure
- This infrastructure has positive social effects
- Public Libraries are issues in public sphere discourse

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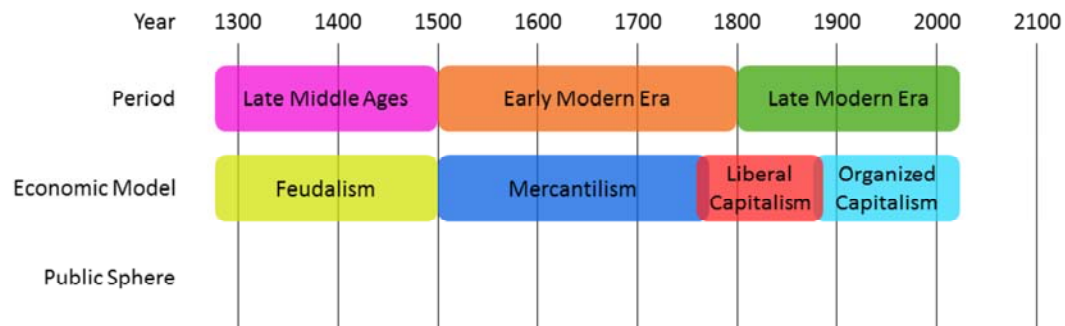
There are three main findings in existing literature about the public sphere and public libraries. First, it is found that public libraries form part of the media infrastructure of the public sphere. They act in the background as carriers, transmitters, and spaces that facilitate communication. This leads to the second finding, namely that the presence of this infrastructure, and the communication it supports, appears related to several positive social outcomes, including social trust or social capital. Thirdly, it has been found that public libraries not only support the public sphere as infrastructure, but also are themselves the subjects of public sphere communication. Discourse in the public sphere by librarians, users of libraries, and politicians affects how libraries are governed and legitimated over time.

## Why associations between the public sphere and public libraries are problematic

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This takes us to why associations between the public sphere and public libraries are problematic. Existing literature focuses on the similarities between the public sphere and public libraries, and as a result, important differences are obscured. The problems arise when these differences are revealed.

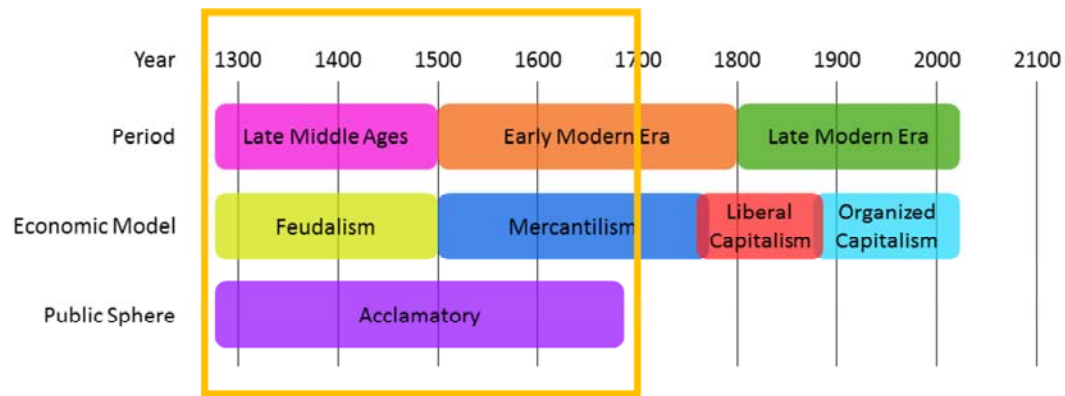
## Problem 1: Anachronism



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The first problem is anachronism. Anachronism means that something is misplaced chronologically—that it's said to inhabit a time where it does not or could not exist. The problem of anachronism, in this case, is that the public sphere, as it is presented in Habermas's "Structural Transformation," is a social category historically-tethered to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

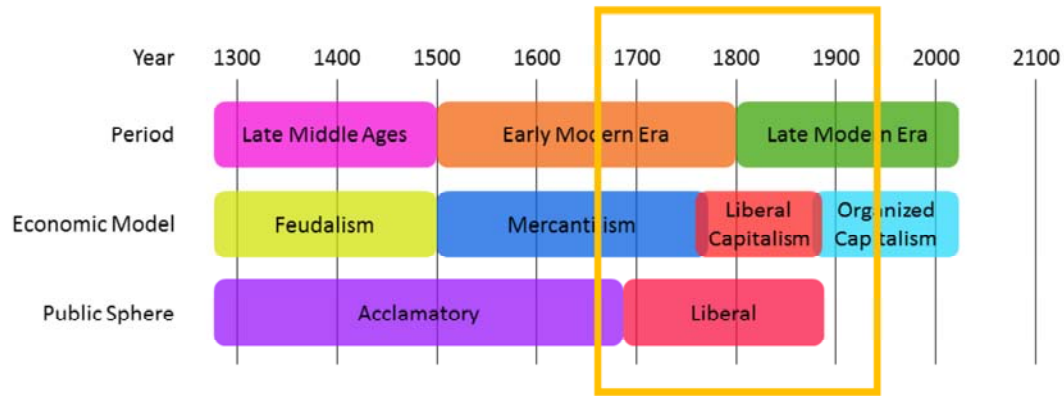
## Problem 1: Anachronism



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It emerged out of an acclamatory public in the late middle ages, one of show and display, one of courts and lords and nobility. The acclamatory public paralleled feudalism and early mercantilism.

## Problem 1: Anachronism

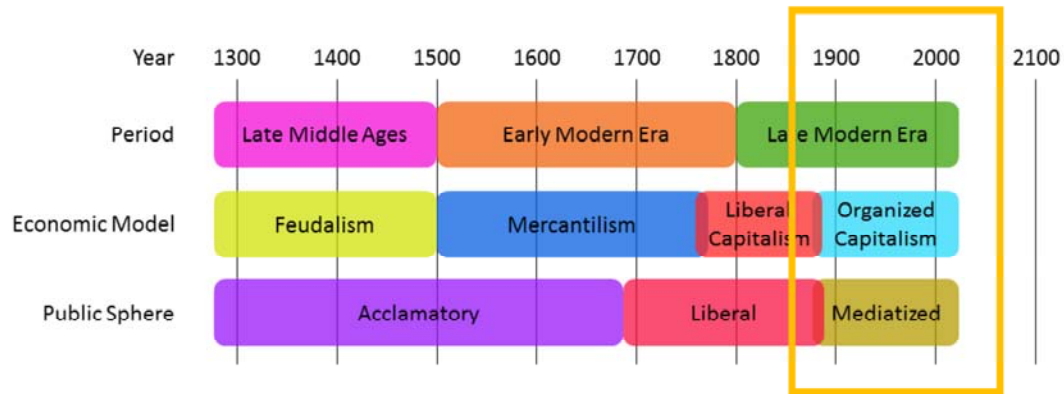


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As mercantilism became more widespread in England, France, and Germany, the public sphere is said to have changed to the liberal public sphere, the kind associated with book publishing, the enlightenment, and the democratic state. In a liberal public sphere, a state emerges, one designed to maintain private property relations and to ensure economic growth. In a liberal public sphere, the state is responsive to civil society because it is dependent on civil society to maintain itself, through taxes and tariffs and laborers and so forth.



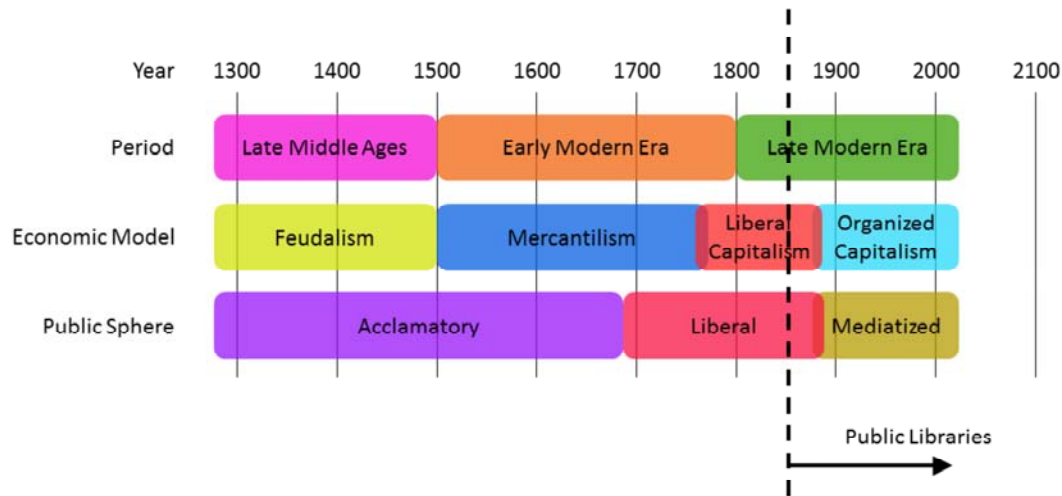
## Problem 1: Anachronism



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But this liberal public sphere did not last. The public sphere transformed again in the late modern era, this time into a power-laden, mediatized version dominated by advertising and propaganda. This shift from the liberal to the mediatized public sphere coincided with a shift from liberal to organized capitalism. In this very Marxist, simplified rendition of public sphere transformation, it's important to note that the liberal public sphere, at least according to Habermas, did not last beyond the mid- to late-nineteenth century.

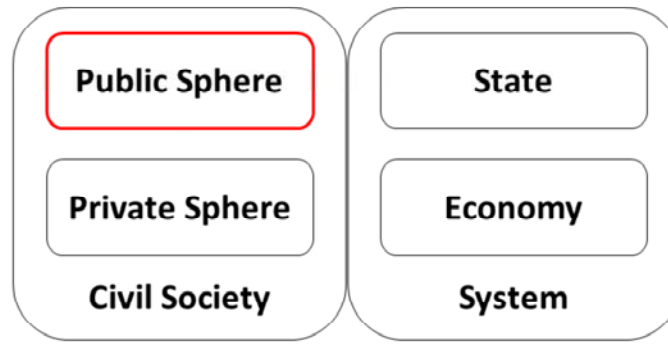
## Problem 1: Anachronism



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At about this same time, just as the liberal public sphere began to fade out, public libraries began to develop. In no country did public libraries develop in any significant way before 1850. This raises an important question: how is it that the liberal public sphere can be associated with public libraries when the two developments overlap only marginally? Those who associate the public sphere with public libraries must therefore confront the problem of anachronism.

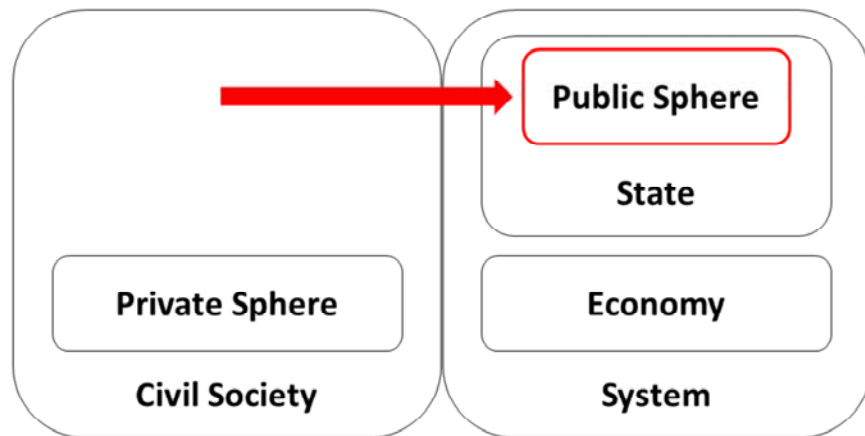
## Problem 2: Anapism



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The second problem is anapism. Like anachronism, anapism is a type of misplacement. But anapism refers to a geographical misplacement, not a temporal one. By anapism here, I also mean the term somewhat metaphorically because I don't mean physical geography, but conceptual or categorical geography. The problem of anapism is that, traditionally, the public sphere is said to inhabit civil society, it's "address" so to speak is between the private sphere and the state. In this location, it is said to relay or amplify private interests so that they may be reflected in the state system. The liberal public sphere, as it was described in "Structural Transformation," manifested in private clubs, the salons in private homes, private reading groups, coffeehouses, table societies, and the like. These are all more or less private institutions distinct from the state.

## Problem 2: Anatopism



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To say that the public sphere manifests in public libraries raises the problem of anatopism because public libraries are by definition state agencies. They are tax-supported, they are formal organizations governed by boards or legislators, whatever the specific case may be. This is a problem conceptually because the “address” of the public sphere is no longer civil society, but the state. Why did the public sphere move to the state? This question is not addressed in existing literature. And the idea that the public sphere is located in the state contradicts a traditional understanding of the term.

## Possible conclusions

- Existing literature about libraries and the public sphere is wrong

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Given these two problems, I believe there are three possible conclusions that might be considered. The first is that all of the existing literature that associates the public sphere with public libraries is totally wrong. In other words, it is a total mistake to associate the public sphere with public libraries. The literature that does so is naïve, a victim of ideology and false consciousness. This literature mistakes appearance for reality. This is one conclusion that might be considered, but in fact, I do not believe this conclusion is correct. It is true that some studies in the literature are naïve, and it is also true that there is no consensus about this issue, but too many people from different countries, cultures, and backgrounds have said the same thing for too long to think the association is completely misguided. So let's discount this conclusion move on to the second one.

## Possible conclusions

- Existing literature about libraries and the public sphere is wrong
- Habermas's account in *Structural Transformation* is wrong

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A second conclusion that might be drawn is that Habermas got it wrong. The account offered in “Structural Transformation” is oversimplified, inaccurate, and the public sphere did not really collapse as he said it did. He was wrong to say it was “refeudalized,” that it disappeared. In fact, I also think that this conclusion is not correct. There are certainly errors in his work, but it is readily apparent to me that topics of mutual interest and concern are often subordinated to propaganda and advertising on mass media. Policy decisions are often dominated by special interests, and topics are framed and decided in a closed and non-transparent way. So Habermas did not get it completely wrong, either. This brings us to the third possible conclusion.

## Possible conclusions

- Existing literature about libraries and the public sphere is wrong
- Habermas's account in *Structural Transformation* is wrong
- Habermas's account and library literature are both generally right but also somewhat confused
- The confusions raise conflicts
- These conflicts can be reconciled with some helpful distinctions

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The third possible conclusion is the one I believe to be correct. It is this: both existing literature about libraries and Habermas's account are correct in general, but they are also confused in ways that, when read together, produce the problems of anachronism and anachronism. I believe further that Habermas's account and existing library literature can be reconciled if some helpful distinctions are made.

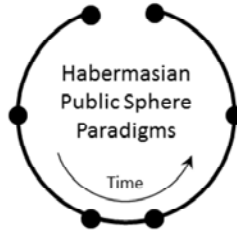
## Proposed solutions

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So let's look at how these two accounts can be revised.



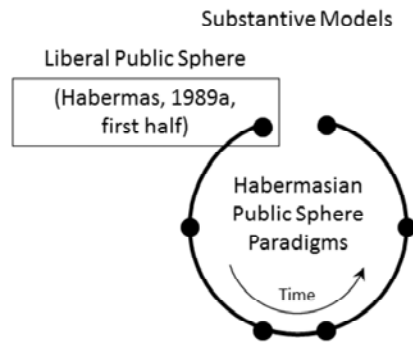
## Solution 1: Acknowledge multiple paradigms



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The first solution I propose is to more carefully distinguish between multiple public sphere paradigms. Here, I use Habermas's work only to illustrate how multiple paradigms of the public sphere exist. While the name "public sphere," or Öffentlichkeit, has remained the same throughout his work, it actually refers to different things in each of his works.

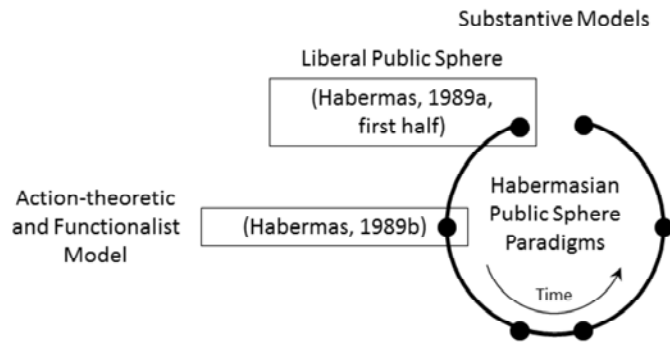
## Solution 1: Acknowledge multiple paradigms



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The first paradigm is the substantive model. One variety of the substantive model is the liberal public sphere that was developed in “Structural Transformation.” This paradigm is substantive in the sense that it refers to actual historical and cultural conditions. But this is only one possible paradigm.

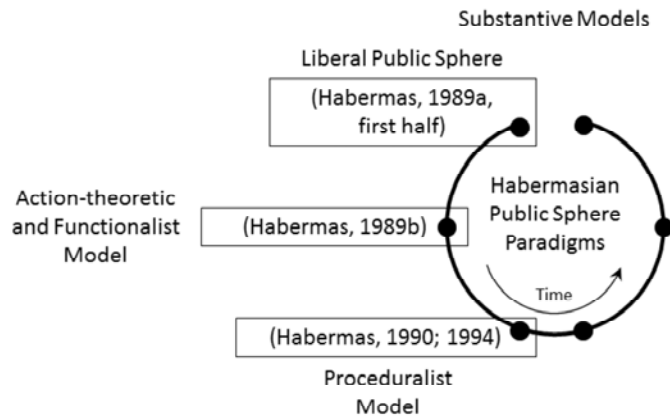
## Solution 1: Acknowledge multiple paradigms



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The next paradigm was developed in “The theory of Communicative action.” This paradigm imagines the public sphere as a space where actors become integrated into action systems.

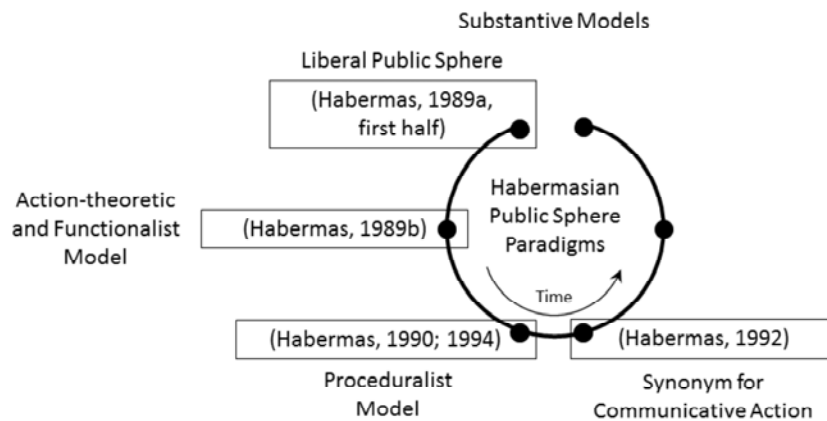
## Solution 1: Acknowledge multiple paradigms



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Next is the public sphere in a proceduralist sense. It refers to Habermas's discourse ethics.

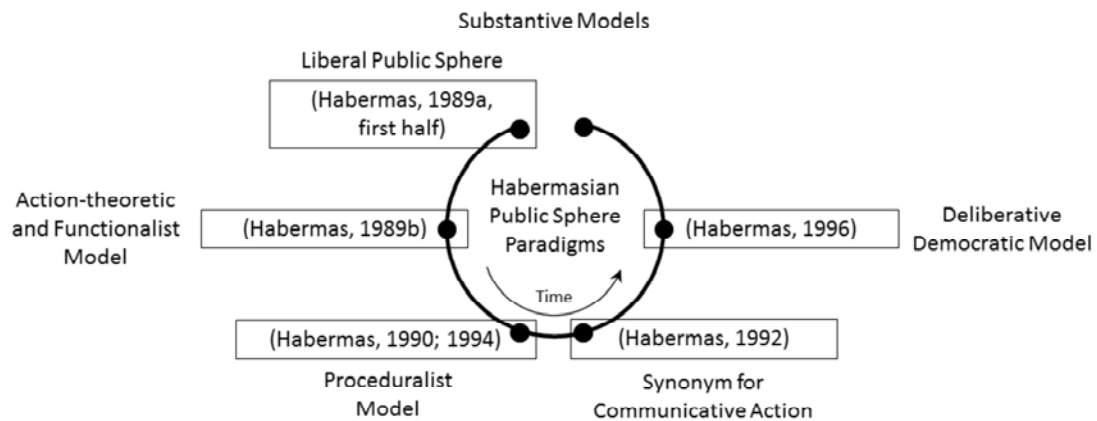
## Solution 1: Acknowledge multiple paradigms



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Habermas also uses the public sphere as a synonym for his concept of communicative action.

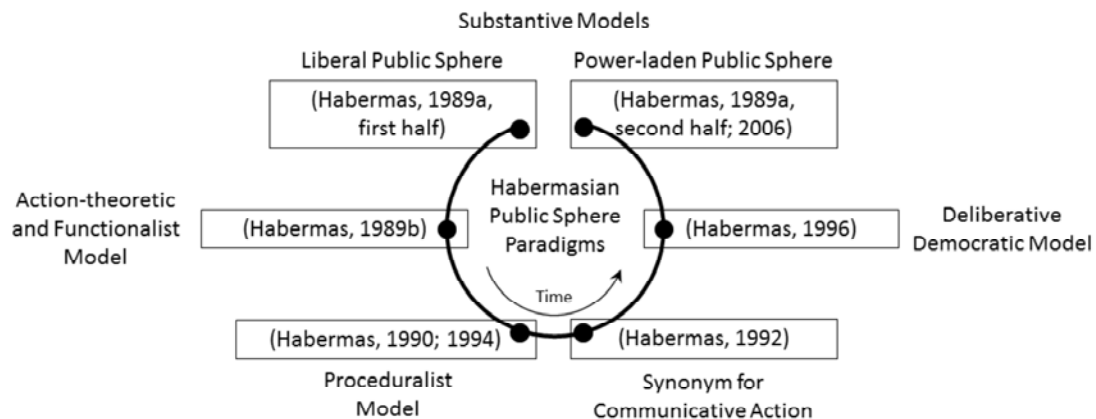
## Solution 1: Acknowledge multiple paradigms



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Next, the public sphere is revised anew, this time in “Between Facts and Norms” as part of the circulation of power model, part of a deliberative democratic understanding of society.

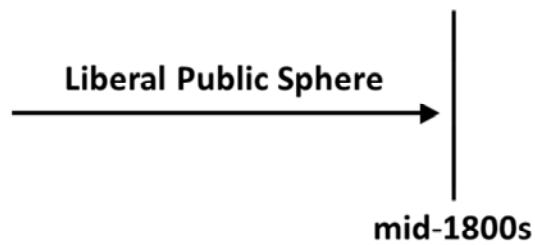
## Solution 1: Acknowledge multiple paradigms



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Finally, Habermas comes “full-circle” by expanding on the other substantive model proposed in the second half of structural transformation—the power-laden public sphere dominated by mass media. The takeaway is that the public sphere is not monolithic, undifferentiated. There is more than one way to understand the public sphere, and the paradigms are not limited to those presented in “structural transformation” Future research can avoid allegations of anachronism and anachronism if they adopt paradigms not tethered to particular epochs and not limited to traditional categorical locations.

## Solution 2: Revise the liberal account

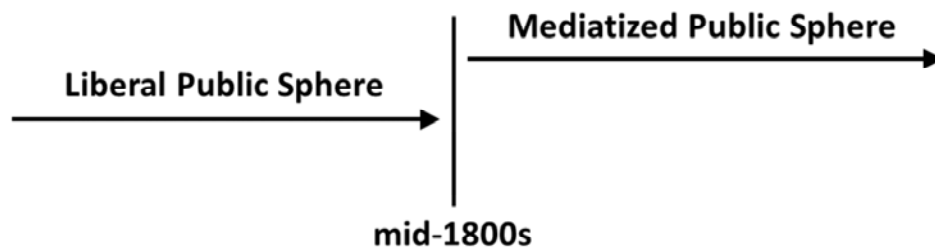


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The second solution I propose is to revise Habermas's account of the structural transformation of the liberal public sphere. According to this account, the liberal public sphere collapsed around the mid-nineteenth century.



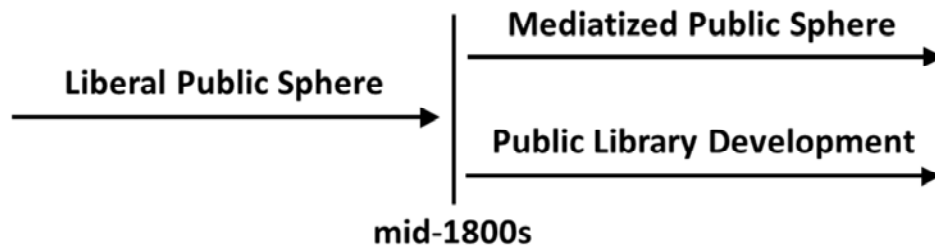
## Solution 2: Revise the liberal account



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In its place formed a mass-media-dominated public sphere, characterized by propaganda, consumption training, and the ideology that open communication was still possible and influential when it actually isn't. This account is somewhat oversimplified and, in light of library literature, perhaps deserves revision.

## Solution 2: Revise the liberal account



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What the literature that associates the public sphere with public libraries suggests is that the public sphere “lived on” in a sense beyond the mid-nineteenth century. It was preserved in the form of public libraries. I believe a new challenge for the library and information sciences and for those who study the history and development of public libraries is to explain in a more cautious and nuanced way why and in what ways the public sphere lived on in public libraries when the public sphere in a broader sense seemed to collapse otherwise. This is a difficult question, but it is a necessary one to consider in order to continue to associate public libraries with the public sphere in a traditional, substantive sense.

## Conclusion

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That brings us to the conclusion.

## Final thoughts

- There is a widespread and longstanding association between the public sphere and public libraries
- This association faces two objections: anachronism and anachronism
- These dilemmas can be solved in two ways:
  - Make distinctions between multiple public sphere paradigms
  - Revise the liberal model
- Is the public sphere in public libraries late, lost or renewed?

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In this presentation I defined what the public sphere is and I described how existing literature in library studies has associated it with public libraries. This literature faces two problems, anachronism and anachronism. I argued that these problems can be reconciled by acknowledging multiple public sphere paradigms and by revising the traditional, liberal account of the public sphere.

So, in the search for the public sphere in public libraries, is it late, lost or renewed? Is it misplaced in time, misplaced conceptually, or is there still a chance to renew its status? I believe you already know my answer to this question. I believe that the public sphere has been renewed and will continue to circulate in the LIS field as a guiding conception for research.

Thank you.

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# Questions and Discussion

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