

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

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Introduction. This theoretical and historical paper problematizes applications of the public sphere concept to the study of public libraries. By working through identified problems, this study sharpens the theoretical ideas of public library research, reveals new research directions, and speculates on how public library research could contribute to a new conception of the public sphere.

Methods. This paper uses conceptual analysis to test the applicability of the public sphere concept to the study of modern public libraries.

Analysis. This study compares and contrasts the meanings of the public sphere concept with empirical realities of public libraries.

Results. The liberal public sphere differs from the empirical realities of public libraries in terms of temporal and categorical locations. A considerable body of research related to public libraries that has accrued over several decades must therefore confront allegations of anachronism and anapism.

Conclusion. Objections of anachronism and anapism can be countered by either acknowledging multiple public sphere paradigms or by revising the substantive models of the public sphere. These strategies raise new research questions and suggest that further study of public libraries could contribute to a fuller understanding of the public sphere concept.

Topic areas:
Information History, Library Studies

Keywords:
Public Sphere, Public Libraries, Library History, Conceptual Analysis

Introduction

The concept of the public sphere has been used to describe the social functions of public libraries internationally for several decades. The concept of the public sphere is most closely linked to the work of German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas, whose book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* was published in German in 1962, Norwegian in 1971, and English in 1989 (Habermas, 1962, 1971, 1989a). Associations between the public sphere and lending libraries were first made in *Structural Transformation* (Habermas, 1989a, p. 51). The public sphere was then associated specifically with public libraries, first with pre-forms of public libraries (Thauer & Vodosek, 1978), then with post-war public library developments (Schuhböck, 1983, 1994). Associations between the public sphere and public libraries diffused to other geographies and languages as *Structural Transformation* became more widely read. Over the last two decades, numerous authors used the public sphere concept to describe public libraries in Europe, North America, and South America.

Associations between the public sphere and public libraries emphasize the similarities between the two. This focus reveals valuable insights about the social functions of public libraries: public libraries act as “communication centers” to facilitate the generation of public opinion (Schuhböck, 1983, p. 211). Public libraries are nodes in a larger media network that forms the communicative infrastructure of society (Vestheim, 1997b, p. 122). As public spheres, public libraries support social policy initiatives, such as social inclusion (Williamson, 1998, 2000). In their roles as “information commons” (McCook, 2004, p. 188), public libraries act as civic training grounds that prepare citizens for democratic society (Kranich, 2004, p. 282). As public sphere meeting places, public libraries build social capital (Audunson, Vårheim, Aabø, & Holm, 2007). It is said that the public sphere concept can serve as a framework and research agenda for the public library sector (Widdersheim, 2015a). As in the field of media studies, it seems that public library literature has witnessed a “rise and rise” of the public sphere over the last two decades (Lunt & Livingstone, 2013, p. 87).

While associations between the public sphere and public libraries have been insightful, fixation on their similarities obscures important differences. The purpose of this paper is therefore to reveal these differences in order to show why associations between the public sphere and public libraries are problematic. To do this, this paper uses conceptual analysis as a methodological approach. Conceptual analysis is

a technique that treats concepts as *classes* of objects, events, properties, or relationships. The technique involves precisely defining the meaning of a given concept by identifying and specifying the *conditions* under which any entity or phenomenon is (or could be) classified under the concept in question. (Furner, 2004, p. 233)

In this paper, the public sphere is the concept and public libraries are the objects in question.

The classification of public libraries as public spheres raises two main problems: anachronism and anatopism. Anachronism refers to a temporal misplacement, anatopism to a categorical one. These problems potentially undermine any association between public libraries and the public sphere. After describing these problems, this paper proposes two argumentative strategies to overcome them. The first strategy acknowledges multiple public sphere paradigms; the second strategy proposes a revision of the substantive paradigm.

This paper is significant because it contributes to a sustained, international conversation regarding the public sphere and its relation to public libraries. This paper includes a literature review in this area of unprecedented scope, an identification of original research questions, and creative solutions to a seeming impasse. Finally, this paper proposes that library research move beyond merely appropriating the public sphere concept and toward developing a new conception of it.

Literature Review

The Public Sphere

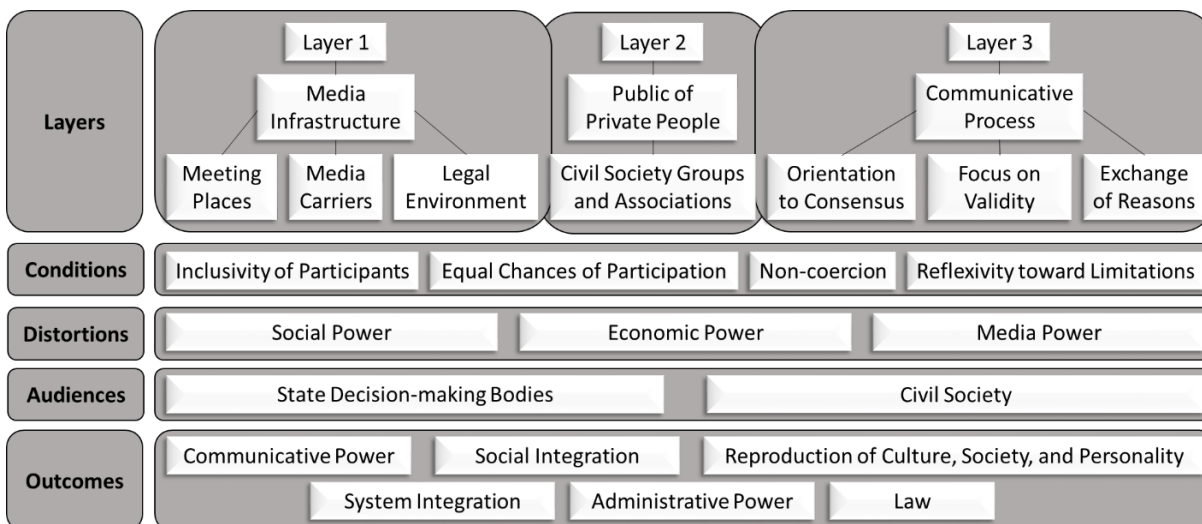
The public sphere is a complex social phenomenon composed of three layers. The first layer is media infrastructure. In the early-modern European account of the public sphere depicted in *Structural Transformation*, this media infrastructure consisted of meeting places such as salons, *Tischgesellschaften* (table societies), and coffee houses; media carriers such as journals, magazines, novels, newspapers, and their associated industries; and legal landscapes that protected free speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, and author and publisher rights (Habermas, 1989a). In contemporary contexts, the form of Layer 1 remains unchanged, but its content differs significantly: media carriers are less bounded by time and distance, meeting places are more diverse and distributed in nature, and the legal landscape has evolved to accommodate new technologies.

The second layer of the public sphere consists of embodied people—the actual public of private people who communicate in virtual or face-to-face forums. These people include civil society groups and individuals, but they also include political parties, lobbyists, unions, for-profit and non-profit corporations, experts and researchers, and politicians (Habermas, 1996, 2006).

The third layer of the public sphere is the communicative process itself, the symbolic exchange of meanings with an emphasis on reasons and an orientation to consensus. Public sphere communication can at any time thematize perceived distortions from social, economic, and media power (Dahlberg, 2001, 2004; Habermas, 2006).

These three layers—media infrastructure, people, and communication—form a public sphere. A public sphere is distinct from a mass, crowd, or other social collective because only a public approximates the necessary conditions of openness, common concern, and debate that apply across all three layers. The outcomes of a public sphere include the formation of communicative power and social integration. Communicative power affects state decision-makers; social integration affects the culture, society, and identity of members of civil society (Habermas, 1984, 1996). The complete public sphere structure is organized visually in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Structure of the public sphere



Public Libraries and the Public Sphere: An Overview

Associations between public libraries and the public sphere began in Germany following the publication of *Structural Transformation* (Habermas, 1962), then diffused throughout Europe, North America, and South America as the public sphere concept became more widely known. Table 1 below lists over 60 works that relate the public sphere concept with public libraries. The works were retrieved using a combination of techniques, including: literature searches for terms such as “public sphere” and “public libraries” in databases such as *Library Literature and Information Science*, *Library and Information Science Abstracts*, *Library, Information Science, and Technology Abstracts*, and *Proquest Dissertations and Theses*; grey literature searches in popular Web search engines using both English and non-English terms such as “Öffentlichkeit” and “esfera pública”; searches in proceedings of relevant conferences, such as *Conceptions of Library and Information Science*, *Association for Information Science and Technology*, and *iConference*; citation chaining; and word of mouth. The table is organized chronologically from oldest to most recent.

Table 1. Works that associate the public sphere with public libraries

#	Author(s) and year	Nation of focus	Type	Methods/Approach
1	Thauer and Vodosek (1978)	Germany	Book	History
2	Schuhböck (1983)	Germany	Article	Multiple case study
3	Greenhalgh, Landry, and Worpole (1993)	UK	Book	Survey/Interview/Observation
4	Schuhböck (1994)	Germany	Article	History
5	Greenhalgh, Worpole, and Landry (1995)	UK	Book	Cultural criticism
6	Webster (1995)	UK	Book	Cultural criticism
7	Vestheim (1997a)	Norway	Thesis	History
8	Vestheim (1997b)	Norway	Article	Cultural criticism
9	Emerek and Ørum (1997)	Denmark	Article	History

10	Williamson (1998)	UK	Thesis	Interviews
11	Williamson (2000)	UK	Article	Cultural criticism
12	Ventura (2001)	Portugal	Thesis	Ethnography
13	Ventura (2002)	Portugal	Book	Ethnography
14	Leckie and Hopkins (2002)	Canada	Article	Ethnography
15	McCook (2003)	US	Article	Cultural criticism
16	Wiegand (2003a)	US	Article	Editorial
17	Wiegand and Bertot (2003)	US	Article	Editorial
18	Wiegand (2003b)	US	Article	Editorial
19	Buschman (2003)	US	Book	Cultural criticism
20	Alstad and Curry (2003)	Non-specific	Article	Cultural criticism
21	Buschman (2004)	US	Article	Cultural criticism
22	Leckie (2004)	Canada	Article	Conceptual
23	Kranich (2004)	US	Chapter	Cultural criticism
24	McCook (2004)	US	Chapter	Textbook
25	Frohmann (2004)	Canada, US, UK	Review	Cultural criticism
26	Audunson (2005)	Non-specific	Article	Conceptual
27	Aabø (2005)	Non-specific	Article	Conceptual
28	Andersen (2005)	Non-specific	Article	Cultural criticism
29	Buschman (2005a)	US	Article	Cultural criticism
30	Buschman (2005b)	US	Article	Cultural criticism
31	Ljødal (2005)	Norway	Report	Interviews
32	Black and Hoare (2006)	UK	Book	History
33	Buschman (2006)	US	Article	Cultural criticism
34	Taipale (2006)	Finland	Paper	Conceptual
35	Andersen and Skouvig (2006)	Denmark	Article	Conceptual
36	Leckie and Buschman (2007)	US and Canada	Chapter	Conceptual
37	Rothbauer (2007)	Non-specific	Chapter	Cultural criticism
38	Newman (2007)	UK	Article	Interviews
39	Buschman (2007)	US	Article	Cultural criticism
40	Audunson et al. (2007)	Norway	Paper	Survey
41	Vårheim, Steinmo, and Ide (2008)	OECD countries	Article	Survey/Interview
42	Burnett and Jaeger (2008)	US	Article	Conceptual
43	Braman (2009)	US	Chapter	Conceptual
44	Taipale (2009)	Finland	Thesis	Multiple case study
45	Jaeger and Burnett (2010)	US	Chapter	Conceptual
46	Aabø, Audunson, and Vårheim (2010)	Norway	Article	Survey
47	Burnett and Jaeger (2011)	US	Article	Conceptual
48	Buschman (2012)	US	Book	Cultural criticism
49	Aabø and Audunson (2012)	Norway	Article	Ethnography
50	Buschman (2013)	US	Article	Cultural criticism
51	Kranich (2013)	US	Article	Cultural criticism

52	Jaeger et al. (2014)	US	Article	Conceptual
53	Frota (2014)	Brazil	Article	Cultural criticism
54	Machado, Elias Junior, and Achilles (2014)	Brazil	Article	Cultural criticism
55	Trosow (2014/2015)	Non-specific	Article	Cultural criticism
56	McNally (2014/2015)	Non-specific	Article	Cultural criticism
57	Richards, Wiegand, and Dalbello (2015)	Non-specific	Book	History
58	Evjen (2015)	UK, Denmark, Norway	Article	Interviews
59	Ingraham (2015)	UK	Article	Discourse analysis
60	Widdersheim and Koizumi (2015a)	US	Paper	Content analysis
61	Widdersheim (2015b)	US	Poster	Content analysis
62	Widdersheim and Koizumi (2015b)	US	Paper	Content analysis
63	Widdersheim (2015a)	Non-specific	Article	Conceptual
64	Widdersheim and Koizumi (forthcoming)	US	Article	Content analysis

The above literature that associates the public sphere with public libraries can be organized into two main categories. In the first category are studies of how the public sphere materializes or manifests in public libraries. These studies explore how public libraries facilitate public sphere communication and what effects this communication has. In the second category are studies of how public libraries are themselves issues of public sphere communication.

Public Libraries as Public Sphere Infrastructure

In the first category of literature, public libraries represent Layer 1 of Figure 1 above: the media infrastructure of the public sphere. In other words, public libraries have replaced the coffee houses, salons, and table societies of Enlightenment-era Europe. Public libraries are the “windows” of an information society (Ventura, 2002), its public sphere “platforms”. As media infrastructures, public libraries act as media suppliers, virtual and physical meeting places, and protected spaces for communicative exchange.

Existing literature about the public sphere and public libraries emphasizes various facets of this infrastructure. One salient facet is the public library’s role as a physical meeting place. Several studies survey how public libraries act as meeting places (Aabø & Audunson, 2012; Aabø et al., 2010; Audunson et al., 2007). In these studies, the asserted benefits of public sphere communication in public libraries are positive by-products of the communicative process itself, such as the creation of civic culture (Kranich, 2004, 2013; McCook, 2003, 2004) and social capital (Audunson et al., 2007).

Existing literature also emphasizes the openness and diversity of media resources of public libraries. Webster (1995) and Buschman (2003) foreground public libraries’ collections that contain diverse viewpoints and are in principle open to anyone. At the same time, it is said that public libraries are not neutral in the kinds of communication they support (Andersen, 2005; Andersen & Skouvig, 2006). There is a strong current in the literature that expresses scepticism about whether the types of culture and messages that are transmitted through libraries are

genuinely undistorted, whether they are not commercialized or hegemonic. Following Webster (1995), Leckie and Hopkins (2002) and Buschman (2003) express ambivalence about whether public libraries are too privatized and business-oriented to facilitate public sphere communication. Similar sentiments are expressed by Vestheim (1997a) and Taipale (2006, 2009).

Some studies describe public libraries as part of a larger media infrastructure for the formation of public opinion (Frota, 2014; Schuhböck, 1983). Widdersheim and Koizumi (2015a, 2015b) find that public libraries were used as a public sphere by civic groups, readings clubs, and communities. In their historical surveys of public library developments, Richards et al. (2015, p. 70) and Black and Hoare (2006, p. 7) remark that public libraries formed part of the public sphere infrastructure of modern societies.

There are several confusions in this category that are worth noting. First, in some studies, the noun public sphere (*der Öffentlichkeit*) in the public opinion and public communication sense is sometimes confused with the adjective public (*öffentlich*) in the sense of government ownership. For example, Webster (1995, p. 176) states that public libraries are public sphere institutions because they are “publicly funded” and “staffed by professional librarians”. Similarly, Leckie and Hopkins (2002, p. 357) claim that “the library is becoming increasingly co-opted by multiple private interests”, implying that public communication necessitates public funding. These descriptions are mistaken because a public sphere does not require tax-based, government management. Early public sphere meetings occurred in private clubs and salons in private homes. Not privatization and commercialization per se, but certain types of privatization and commercialization potentially distort the public sphere. A second confusion is between public communication and information transfer. Jaeger et al. (2014) states that “libraries, schools, and other public sphere organizations...exist specifically to ensure that information continues to move between the small worlds”. Public sphere communication requires information exchange, but this condition alone is insufficient. The “information equals democracy” assumption has been previously interrogated (Lievrouw, 1994). Reducing the public sphere to information transfer leaves no room for distinctions of information quality and use. Williamson (1998, 2000) makes a third mistake by associating the public sphere with service provision. Services provided by public libraries, such as those for job seekers, are not necessarily related to public sphere communication. Such an association seems to confuse social integration with system integration (Habermas, 1989b)

Public Libraries as a Public Sphere Issue

The second category of existing literature that associates public libraries with the public sphere focuses on how public libraries are the topic of public sphere communication. This literature discusses how public libraries have been or currently are legitimated by various groups in the public sphere. In some cases, public libraries were created due to popular pressure from civil society groups (Schuhböck, 1994, p. 218; Widdersheim, 2015b). Once institutionalized, public libraries themselves mobilize support on their behalf (Machado et al., 2014; Widdersheim & Koizumi, 2015b). Recent studies use interviews or discourse analysis to study how various stakeholders, such as politicians, civil society groups, and librarians legitimate public libraries in the public sphere (Evjen, 2015; Ingraham, 2015; Newman, 2007). Insofar as public libraries constitute public sphere infrastructure, discourse about that infrastructure is said to be a

“metasphere” of the library (Ingraham, 2015, p. 156). Emerek and Ørum (1997) and Vestheim (1997a) establish that this metasphere affected the historical development of public libraries in Denmark and Norway.

Problems of Public Sphere Status in Public Libraries

Associations between the public sphere and public libraries yield a nuanced understanding of the social functions of public libraries; however, by focusing exclusively on the similarities between public libraries and the public sphere, existing literature inadvertently overlooks two significant differences.

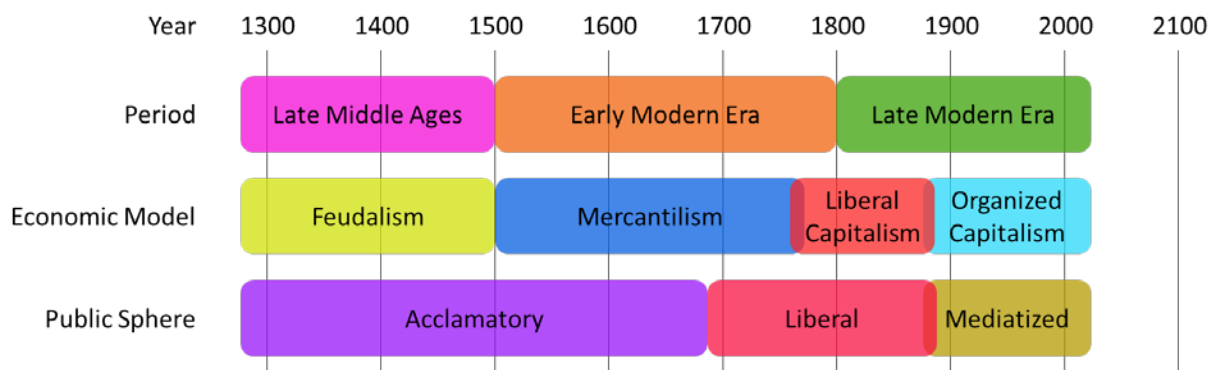
Late: The Public Sphere and Anachronism

The first significant difference between public libraries and the public sphere is that the liberal model of the public sphere is a historically-bounded concept. As it was described in *Structural Transformation*, the public sphere emerged in eighteenth-century France, England, and Germany following a general shift from feudalism to mercantile capitalism and a gradual growth of state bureaucracy. As a social-historical category, the public sphere represented an unfulfilled promise, an ideology that failed to materialize authentically even in its heyday in the mid-nineteenth century. By the mid-nineteenth century, due to economic and technological changes, the public sphere in the liberal sense began to collapse into a mediatized, power-ridden (*vermachteten*) public sphere, one that was “re-feudalized” by state and corporate interests to form a staged and acclamatory public (Eley, 1992; Habermas, 1989a, p. 195). Habermas is unequivocal regarding the temporal location of the liberal public sphere model described in the first half of *Structural Transformation*:

Although the liberal model of the public sphere is still instructive today with respect to the normative claim that information be accessible to the public, it cannot be applied to the actual conditions of an industrially advanced mass democracy organized in the form of the social welfare state. (Habermas, 1974, p. 54)

It is clear from this passage and from *Structural Transformation* that the public sphere only describes cultural dynamics that peaked around the mid-nineteenth century but did not last beyond the late nineteenth century (Habermas, 1989a). Figure 2 below shows a simplified historical transformation of the public sphere.

Figure 2. Simplified historical transformation of the European public sphere



The year 1850 is an important date for the purpose of this discussion because public libraries did not develop significantly in any nation before that date. Public libraries in this case refer to state-sponsored libraries, not libraries that are privately owned but open for public use, such as the *Gebrauchsöffentlichkeit* mentioned by Schuhböck (1994, p. 217) and Vestheim (1997b, p. 121). Table 2 below shows significant formative developments in public libraries internationally. The data in Table 2 is drawn from Richards et al. (2015).

Table 2. Formative developments in public libraries internationally

Nation	Significant early events in public library development
United Kingdom of Britain and Northern Ireland	Public Libraries Act of 1850 The Library Association founded in London (1877)
Denmark	State Libraries Agency (1882) Professional association established (1915) Public Libraries Act (1920)
Norway	Opening of Deichmanske Bibliotek (1898) Professional association established (1915)
Sweden	Establishment of state funding (1905)
Russia	Founding of public library by Liubov Borisovna Khavkina (1886)
Poland	Founding of public library in Warsaw by Zaluski brothers (1747); removed by Russia in 1795 Warsaw Philanthropic Society opens free readings rooms (1861)
Bulgaria	Law requiring all communities to form reading societies (1927)
Germany	Karl Benjamin established Sunday school with library open to public (1828); accepted as town library in 1833 Friedrich von Raumer established four public libraries in 1850 Book hall movement (<i>Bücherhallenbewegung</i>) started by Eduard Reyer and Constantin Nörrenberg (1895)
Czechoslovakia	Matica Slovenská founded in 1863 Martin (now the Slovak National Library in Slovakia)
Belgium	Willemsfond establishes public library opens in Ghent (1856) and small libraries across Flanders Davidsfonds establishes small libraries across Flanders (1875) Ligue de l'enseignement establishes small libraries with primary schools in Brussels (1864)
Netherlands	Libraries established at Utrecht (1892) and Dordrecht (1898) Central Association for Public Reading Rooms and Libraries established (1908)
France	Establishment of hundreds of small libraries run by volunteers (1860-1900) Eugène Morel publishes <i>Bibliothèque</i> (1908-1909) and begins training courses for librarians (1910-1913)
Italy	Antonio Bruni opens the first popular library in Prato (1861) Municipal libraries established in Milan (1867) and Turin (1869)
Spain	Small public libraries open (1869)
Portugal	Decree opens small public libraries (1870)

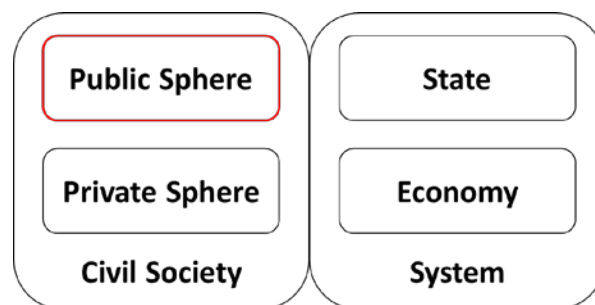
United States	Massachusetts passed legislation to fund a public library in Boston (1848); Boston Public Library opened in 1854 American Library Association formed (1876) New York Public Library established (1895)
Canada	Ontario (1882), Manitoba (1899), Saskatchewan (1906), Alberta (1907), New Brunswick (1929), Nova Scotia (1937), and Quebec (1959) adopt public library legislation

Supposing that Table 2 above is correct, and that few significant public library developments occurred in any country before the mid-nineteenth century; and supposing also that *Structural Transformation* is correct that the liberal public sphere—as an empirical category tied to economic and cultural conditions—began to disintegrate around the mid-1800s, then the following question must be addressed: how can the public sphere describe public libraries when the public sphere began to collapse just as public libraries began to develop? Existing literature that associates the public sphere with public libraries must confront allegations of anachronism—the application of the public sphere concept to a period where it does not belong. Literature that associates the public sphere with public libraries appropriates the public sphere concept, but only incompletely: it fails to account for its temporal boundedness. The same literature that borrows the public sphere concept to describe public libraries in the late nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries also implicitly repudiates the claim that the public sphere is a temporally-bounded concept. How is it that contemporary public libraries can be classed as public spheres in a way that is non-illusory and non-ideological? It remains to be explained how public libraries can be associated with the public sphere in a non-anachronistic way.

Lost: The Public Sphere and Anachronism

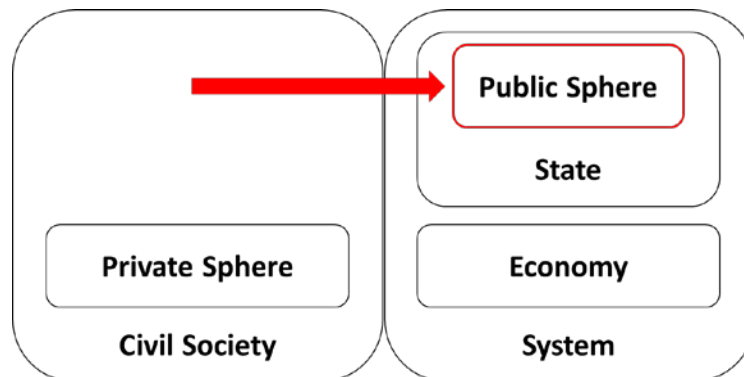
A second significant difference between the public sphere and public libraries, besides temporal location, is geographical location. Geography in this sense does not mean physical geography, it means categorical geography. Traditionally defined, the public sphere inhabits a space in civil society that mediates between civil society and the state. In this position, it affects both (Eley, 1992; Habermas, 1989a). The public sphere affects civil society through political-cultural critiques of everyday practices (Cohen & Arato, 1995), and it affects the state by influencing laws and legislation (Habermas, 1996). This in-between position of the public sphere, as a specifically non-state entity, is explained in *Structural Transformation* (Habermas, 1989a, p. 30). This conceptual geography is visualized in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Traditional location of the liberal public sphere



This conceptual geography differs significantly from the empirical reality of public libraries because public libraries are state authorities—they are state-owned, state-managed, and state-funded. It is true that public libraries vary in their specific relationships with the state (Joeckel, 1935; Usherwood, 1993): some are trusts, some are non-profit organizations, and others are municipal departments. Whatever the specific relationship to local governments, however, public libraries are by definition state-sponsored agencies. Many are funded by wealth transfer from the economy to the state, which is enforced through tax legislation. Because public libraries are state authorities, literature that associates the public sphere with public libraries must confront the objection of anapopism—the application of the public sphere concept to a categorical location where it does not belong. Associations between the public sphere and public libraries inadvertently shift the categorical location of the public sphere from civil society to the state. This anapopic shift is visualized in Figure 4. Existing literature has not explained how the public sphere concept can describe state authorities like public libraries without succumbing to objections of conceptual anapopism.

Figure 4. Anapopic shift of the public sphere in library literature



Renewed Status? Accommodation Strategies for the Public Sphere in Public Libraries

Problems of anachronism and anapopism are obscured in existing literature that associates the public sphere with public libraries. Because the problems have been overlooked, no solutions yet exist. The problems of anachronism and anapopism undermine a substantial body of literature about public libraries that has accrued over several decades. Existing literature would benefit from an explanation of how studies of public libraries could accommodate a public sphere conception while also avoiding objections of anachronism and anapopism.

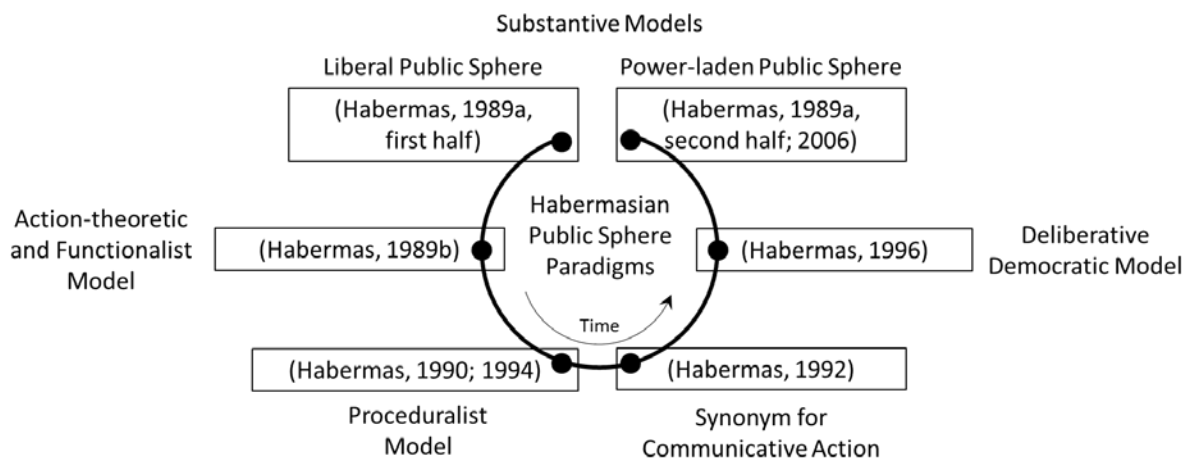
Strategy 1: Multiple Public Sphere Paradigms

One strategy of accommodation is to recognize public sphere paradigms that are more flexible in terms of temporal and conceptual location. Existing literature largely appropriates the conception of the public sphere from *Structural Transformation* (Habermas, 1989a). This work actually contains two empirical conceptions of the public sphere: the liberal model that existed from the late eighteenth century to the late nineteenth century, on the one hand, and the power-ridden (*vermachteten*) model that began to form in the mid-nineteenth century and continues today (Habermas, 2006). These conceptions describe cultural and technological conditions, and because they make claims about the actual content of the public sphere, they are “substantive” models of the public sphere (Fraser, 1990, note 34). Debates about the “existence” of the public

sphere implicitly work within the substantive paradigm (Leckie & Buschman, 2007, p. 13). It might be said that *Structural Transformation* also contains a normative or transhistorical model of the public sphere as well (Kramer, 1992), but this model actually developed in later works (Habermas, 1984, 1989b).

Substantive, empirical models only represent one possible paradigm. Since *Structural Transformation*, the public sphere has been used by Habermas in a discourse-theoretic and proceduralist way (Habermas, 1990, 1994), a functionalist or action-theoretic way (Habermas, 1989b), as a synonym for communicative action (Habermas, 1992), and in a normative political theory related to law and deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1996). Paradigms of the public sphere have therefore evolved and changed over time (Baxter, 2011; Johnson, 2006). One interpretation of these various public sphere paradigms is visualized in Figure 5 below. If *Structural Transformation* represents the first set of public sphere models, then over time several paradigms have emerged, coming “full circle” with a return to the substantive paradigm (Habermas, 2006).

Figure 5. Habermasian public sphere paradigms

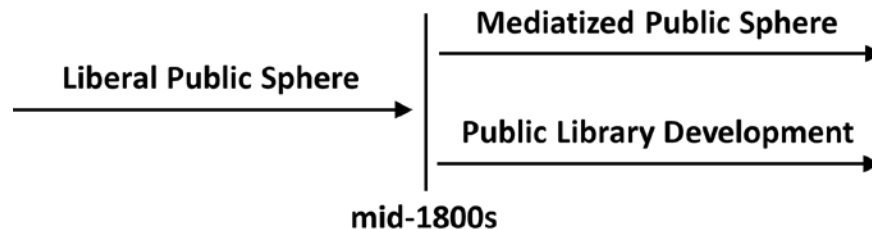


Literature that associates the public sphere with public libraries could better distinguish between different public sphere paradigms and apply those that are not tethered to temporal and conceptual locations. Existing literature mentions these alternative models: for example, the deliberative democracy model (Kranich, 2013; Vestheim, 1997b) and the action-theoretic model (Vestheim, 1997b); but these models have not been associated with public libraries in detail. That existing literature assumes a single, monolithic public sphere concept is belied by statements such as “the library also appears to be a part of the public sphere in the Habermasian sense” (Aabø et al., 2010, p. 25). As Figure 5 shows, however, there is no single Habermasian sense. Alternative paradigms present attractive future research directions because, unlike the substantive and empirical models, normative, proceduralist, and ideal-typical models do not describe the culture of a particular place and time, but instead explain hypothetical rules and normative possibilities.

Strategy 2: Revision of the Substantive Model

Besides recognizing and applying more flexible models of the public sphere, another strategy to accommodate associations between the public sphere and public libraries is to revise the conditions of the substantive paradigm. The traditional, substantive paradigm of the public sphere as described in *Structural Transformation* supposes that the liberal public sphere began to collapse in the mid-nineteenth century, forming a power-laden and mediatized version, one designed for manipulation and consumption training (Habermas, 1989a). Around this same time, public libraries began to develop internationally. These two processes are visualized in Figure 6 below.

Figure 6. Public sphere and public library trajectories



It is tempting to suppose, based on Figure 6, that the development of public libraries represents a continuation of the liberal public sphere in new garb, one parallel to but distinct from the mediatized public sphere. This is the basic argument of Vestheim (1997a, 1997b) and Emerek and Ørum (1997) in their historical accounts of public library developments in Norway and Denmark. Vestheim (1997a) and Buschman (2003) claim that the public sphere that had manifested in public libraries in Norway and the US, respectively, collapsed later. These histories, however, do not sufficiently acknowledge their conflict with the central thesis in *Structural Transformation*. A fuller explanation is still needed for how the public sphere “lived on” in public libraries even as the public sphere, in general, collapsed otherwise, and why the public sphere shifted in location from civil society to the state (Leckie & Buschman, 2007).

Supposing that the public sphere “lived on” in a substantive way in public libraries, then public libraries represent an exception that was overlooked by Habermas (1989a) in his general account of public sphere collapse. Perhaps the structural transformation of the media infrastructure sustained by public libraries followed an alternate trajectory. More detailed, cautious, and empirically-based arguments are needed that describe the public sphere in public libraries in a non-illusory and non-ideological way. Did the location of the public sphere shift from civil society to the state as the state grew in complexity and public/private intermingled? This is still an open question. Just as the mass-democratic social-welfare state began to provide material and bio-political infrastructure in the mid-nineteenth century, perhaps it also supplied the symbolic infrastructure for a distinct kind of public sphere. Such a thesis, if developed further, could contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of public sphere conditions.

Conclusion

This paper used conceptual analysis to identify two differences between the public sphere concept and public libraries. The differences raise two problems, anachronism and anatopism.

These problems are overlooked in existing literature and potentially undermine any association between the public sphere and public libraries. In order to address these problems, and in order to show how the public sphere concept might still apply to public libraries, this paper proposed two argumentative strategies. The first acknowledges a multiplicity of public sphere conceptions, and the second suggests a revision of the substantive paradigm. These strategies remain speculative and require further elaboration, but they raise several new research questions and contribute to an ongoing international conversation that is central to the public library field.

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