

# The Coloniality of Globality and Media

## *The Latest Structural Transformations of the Global Public Spheres*

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### ABSTRACT

This chapter offers a sketch of what the author calls the “mestizo/decolonial” version of theorizing globalization. The argument is that if we live in a globalized world, it is because it was also colonized, that is, colonization is one of the strongest and oldest forces of globalization. Then, the chapter considers the role of what Jürgen Habermas called the bourgeois category of the “public sphere” in the age of globalization(s). Two questions are key: How does the concept of the “public sphere” relate to globalization? If we can talk about a world society that has been partly created by processes of globalization, can we also talk about the rise of global public spheres? In this context, a second question is raised: in the putative age of world public spheres, can we also continue to talk about the rational and rationalizing dimension of the public sphere as the social/political/cultural/economic sphere in which something like “public opinion” can, could, should be wanted or had? The final section offers an analysis of the “newer or latest structural transformations” of the public sphere by focusing on the effects of the rise of “social media” and new “communication technologies” and their effects on the political.

### KEYWORDS

cell phone, coloniality, global public spheres, mestizo/decolonial, public opinion, social media

HOW WE ARE EITHER TOO GLOBALIZED  
OR NOT ENOUGH

It would be irresponsible and misanthropic not to mention what has been going on during the writing of this chapter. There is much to be foregrounded. First, there is the COVID-19 pandemic, which has claimed the lives of more than six million people, more than a million in the United States alone, as of this writing. This pandemic started out as a global health crisis that then snowballed into a global systemic crisis, impacting economies, politics, food production, and transportation. Second, there is the relentless background crisis of global climate change, which continues to manifest itself with ever more turbulent and destructive weather. Two major consequences of this severe weather have been food crises and the rise of climate refugees, both across nations and within nations. Third, in 2021 as we finally saw the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, after a twenty-year war that apparently led nowhere (since the gains made there have been revoked and dismantled by the new regime), Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine. In both cases, new humanitarian crises have been unleashed. In Afghanistan, the country has retreated to its barbaric past, in particular unleashing new waves of violence against women. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has meant an unaccounted number of civilian deaths, and it has also unleashed a wave of shocks to the global economy, above all to the food supply chain, which is projected to have dire consequences for those countries that rely on Ukrainian fertilizers, grain, and oil. Fourth, as our world has become more globally integrated, interdependent, and vulnerable, we have the rise of the new, or not so new, right-wing, nativist, and xenophobic populisms in both the so-called developed and developing worlds.

The last decade, and in particular the last half a decade, has been the stage for a perfect global storm: a global pandemic, major shocks to the national and global economies, new humanitarian crises with the end of hostilities in one place and the beginning of severe ones in another. And as the medicine that is worse than the disease, we have the rise of antiglobalist nationalism. One could say that these crises all reveal how globalization is a decisive fact of our modern world. The COVID-19 pandemic is a by-product of our globalized work and commodity markets. The ways we either address it or fail to are indicators of global networks. Yet, we should also highlight that the global health crisis was managed at national levels. Even the European Union did not have consistent or generalized health measures. In the United States the situation was even worse, for every health measure was politicized to further heat up an already boiling political polarization. The fact that we have yet to meet the goal of vaccinating 70 percent of the global population against the coronavirus is an indication of both successful and failed globalization., while the spread of the virus across the globe partially shows how much we have been globalized. Developing nations in particular have been hard hit by the pandemic (India is a case in point) because of the lack of access to (reliable) vaccines. So, one could say that this shows how poorly globalized we remain. And just as the

global economy was beginning to rebound from the shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic, after the global economic crisis of 2008–9, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has unleashed another global economic crisis, partly fueled by the uncertainty in the fuel supply—whether it be gas, oil, or electricity. Again, we are either too globalized, or not enough, that such crises continue to recur. The return, revival, and metastization of populism into rabid xenophobic and racist politics is a global phenomenon that must be seen as a response to globalization. It is for this reason that many of these populist leaders see themselves as antiglobalists.

In what follows and against the background of this bleak global outlook, which has resulted from both globalizing and antiglobalizing forces, I want to consider how we must rethink “globalization,” both as a form of theorizing and as a fact of our modern world system. In the following section, I will offer a sketch of what I will call the “mestizo/decolonial” version of theorizing globalization. The argument there is that if we live in a globalized world, it is because it was also colonized, that is, colonization is one of the strongest and oldest forces of globalization. Then, I will turn to consider the role of what Jürgen Habermas called the bourgeois category of the “public sphere” in the age of globalization(s). There are two major questions motivating this section. One asks: how does the concept of the “public sphere” either square or not with globalization? If we can talk about a world society that has been partly created by processes of globalization, can we also talk about the rise of a global public sphere? In this context, partly staged through a confrontation between two thinkers of the public sphere, namely Habermas and Niklas Luhmann, the second question is raised: in the putative age of a world public sphere, can we also continue to talk about the rational and rationalizing dimension of the public sphere as the social/political/cultural/economic sphere in which something like “public opinion” can, could, should be wanted or had? In a final section, I turn towards what Habermas has most recently called a “newer structural transformation” of the public sphere by focusing on the effects of the rise of “social media” and new “communication technologies” and their effects on the political (Habermas, 2021). I will argue that the newer “social media” has had both beneficial effects and corrosive consequences, in particular for public deliberation, democratic self-determination, and nondomination. Their effects are consequences of globalization and antiglobalization forces.

GLOBALIZATIONS FROM ABOVE AND BELOW,  
VERTICAL AND HORIZONTAL:  
MESTIZO/DECOLONIAL GLOBALIZATION

The literature on globalization, or rather, to speak along with Manfred B. Steger (2008), globalisms, is too vast and rich to attempt to say anything meaningful in the space of a chapter. At the most, one can attempt a typology of theories of globalization, which may allow us to begin to get a handle on the concept and assumptions that inform some of its theorization. In their important and still indispensable

TABLE 6.1 Conceptualizing Globalization: Three Tendencies

|                                    | Hyperglobalists  | Skeptics   | Transformationalists  |
|------------------------------------|--|--|---|
| What's new?                        | A global age   | Trading blocs, weaker geogovernance than in earlier periods    | Historically unprecedented levels of global interconnectedness        |
| Dominant features                  | Global capitalism, global governance, global civil society | World less interdependent than in 1890s                        | "Thick" (intensive and extensive) globalization                       |
| Power of national governments      | Declining or eroding                                       | Reinforced or enhanced   | Reconstituted, restructured   |
| Driving forces of globalization    | Capitalism and technology                                  | States and markets   | Combined forces of modernity  |
| Patterns of stratification         | Erosion of old hierarchies                                 | Increased marginalization of South                             | New architecture of world order                                       |
| Dominant motif                     | McDonalds, Madonna, etc.                                   | National interest  | Transformation of political community                                 |
| Conceptualization of globalization | As a reordering of the framework of human action           | As internationalization and regionalization                    | As the reordering of interregional relations and action at a distance |
| Historical trajectory              | Global civilization  | Regional blocs/ clash of civilizations                         | Indeterminate: global integration and fragmentation                   |
| Summary argument                   | The end of the nation-state                                | Internationalization depends on state acquiescence and support | Globalization transforming state power and world politics             |

*Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture*, from 1999, David Held, Anthony McGrew, David Goldblatt, and Jonathan Perraton open by offering a typology of the different positions that different theorists of globalization may be said to hold, or what they call "tendencies": the hyperglobalists, the skeptics, and the transformationalists (Held et al., 1999). On page 10 of their introduction, they provide us with a very useful chart to make sense of the tendencies they identify.

The chart is legible by itself, but from it I think it is important to highlight three rows: first, driving forces of globalization; second, historical trajectory; and third, the summary argument. For the hyperglobalists, the primary driving force of globalization is what we can call "technocapitalism," by which I mean that capitalist expansion is predicated in the creation of both markets and new technologies to exploit labor power so as to maximize capitalist accumulation. For the skeptics, while there are tendencies to create transnational and global markets, these markets remain tethered to nation-states. If for the hyperglobalists nation-states are at

the service of global capitalism, for the skeptics, market and capital have remained dependent on and subservient to nation-states. For the transformationalists, neither markets nor the nation-state are the only forces bringing us together: there is the rise of a global media and a “global republic of letters,” both national and transnational, and one may say “imperial” and “postimperial,” “colonial” and “postcolonial” (Aschcroft, 2002) imaginaries that have enabled us to imagine ourselves members of “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1991). For the transformationalists, there is no one agent or vector of globalization.

As pertains to the row of “historical trajectory,” for the hyperglobalists, globalization means the rise of a global civilization that is driven by commercialization and commodification, in which everything and everyone have been standardized: all airports look alike, as do all malls. For the skeptics, the historical trajectory can be understood along the lines of Samuel P. Huntington’s combative *Clash of Civilizations*, at worst, or the rise of regional blocs: the Americas, the European Union, Eastern Europe or what was left of the Soviet Union, and those economies in the East under the aegis of China that may be considered an Asian bloc, and so on. For the transformationalists, the historical trajectory is one of what has been called “glocalization,” the construction of global effects in distinct localities and regions. One may say that for the transformationalists, globalization produces the local and the local the global, thus leading to both integration and fragmentation.

Finally, with respect to the row dealing with the “summary argument”: the hyperglobalists see the end of the nation-state, and the rise of a world economy; the skeptics argue for the endurance and perhaps even recrudescence of the nation-state and even its delinking from global economic networks; the transformationalists argue that globalization has given rise to new forms of governance, leading to the transformation of state power under the watch of what has been called the global regime of human rights and international law.

I have highlighted those three rows because by doing so we can notice that the differentiation of these three “tendencies,” as identified by the authors, has to do with economic, political, and cultural power, and how these powers are projected, whether from above or from below, and with what reach, whether horizontal, across nations and continents, or only vertical within countries and regions. In other words, these three tendencies have to do with what kind of primacy you give to economics, the political, and the cultural. As useful as this typology is, however, I do think that it needs a fourth column, or “tendency,” one that I would call the “mestizo/decolonial” tendency, which would include the postcolonial and decolonial thinkers who have developed their own critique of Euro-American globalization and their globalist theorists.<sup>1</sup> My addenda to Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, and Perraton’s typology, and following their useful chart, may look like this:

In my typology of globalists, or globalization theorists, “mestizo/decolonial” theorists are neither glib hyperglobalists nor pessimistic skeptics, nor, and much less, (Pollyannaish) transformationalists, who think that globalization is always for

TABLE 6.2 Mestizo: Decolonial Globalist

| Mestizo/Decolonial Globalists      |  |
|------------------------------------|--|
| What's new?                        | The Global/Modern/Colonial System  |
| Dominant features                  | Entangled, simultaneous, intensive and extensive, fragmented economic/political/cultural/linguistic integration  |
| Power of national governments      | Subordinate, puppet national government, or hypernational governments as response to both decolonization and ongoing imperialism   |
| Driving force of globalization     | Multilayered and nonsynchronous differentiated integration in which globalization from above is countered by local glocalizations and acculturations   |
| Pattern of stratification          | New global order of governance and the coloniality of Euro-American political force that is countered by that new glocalized global human rights regime  |
| Dominant motif                     | The coloniality of all power (economic, political, cultural, and social)   |
| Conceptualization of globalization | The reordering and integration of regional systems into a world system that is a colonial/global/modern system   |
| Historical trajectory              | Enduring dependencies within a growing integration and glocalization   |
| Summary argument                   | Globalization is a fact of world history, but it assumed truly global proportions in the sixteenth century with the integration of the Americas and Africa through the conquest of the Americas and the rise of the slave trade and the plantation system—an all-too-often neglected factor in the globalization of the world. |

the better of all, including former colonies. They are a much-needed corrective to all the excellent theorizing that has been done on globalization that has hitherto not factored in the role of the colonization of the so-called “New World,” that is, the Americas, in a new world-system. In their introduction to their volume Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, and Perraton identify five major sources of contention among theorists of globalization:

- conceptualization;
- causation;
- periodization;
- impact; and
- trajectory of globalization (Held et al., 2000).

For mestizo/decolonial thinkers who theorize globalization, this means to think about what Quijano called the “colonial matrix of power,” that is, the way in which the world-system that was configured by the conquest of the Americas and the establishment of the global slave trade gave rise to new forces of globalization (Quijano, 2008). For them, therefore, there is no single causation, but an ensemble of institutions that gave us the Global/Modern/Colonial System.

Consequently, for them the tower of global time (i.e., how chronologies of the rise of the modern global system must be temporalized) must be set to the sixteenth century, the time of the so-called invention/discovery of the Americas. For mestizo/decolonial global thinkers, the impacts have been indeed global, recurrent, and enduring, transforming the whole world. In terms of trajectory, as I noted above, for this group of thinkers, the trajectory is both more globalization (interdependence) and more glocalization (differentiated integration), or *mestizaje* and creolization.

Above, I indicated why I had highlighted three rows from Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, and Perraton's typology of globalists, namely because they allow us to see what I called three forms of power: economic, political, and cultural. My argument is that mestizo/decolonial global thinkers allow us to see another dimension of power, namely its coloniality, what Quijano called "the coloniality of power." This means that all power, whether it be economic, political, or cultural, is infused, articulated, telescoped, and circulated by the networks, dependencies, and uncouplings we inherited from globalizing colonization and colonial globalization.

#### PUBLIC SPHERES, IMAGINED COMMUNITIES, AND PUBLIC OPINIONS

In their impressive *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450–1800*, Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin document how the book became a "force of change" already in the sixteenth century (Febvre & Martin, [1976] 2010: chap. 8). Their book could have easily been titled *The Revolution of the Book*. As they write: "Assuming an average print run to be no greater than 500, then about 20 million books were printed *before 1500*, an impressive total by 20th-century standards, and even more so when we remember that the Europe of the day was far less populous than now" (248–49). Then, they add later in the same chapter, "But the point is that by the 16th century the printed book had been produced in sufficient quantities to make it accessible to anyone who could read" (262). In his massive *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making*, Adrian Johns offers one of the most impressive histories of the impact that "the book" had on English culture, focusing particularly on London (Johns, 1998). Febvre and Martin argue that the dissemination and commercialization of books allowed for the dissemination of scientific knowledge and new "theological" perspectives that fueled the Reformation. Their argument is that the now easily available and affordable book catalyzed both scientific and religious revolutions. The medieval book, which was mostly copied by hand in monasteries by monks, was a luxury item, available mostly to the clergy. Eventually, the hand-copied book gave way to the incunabula, the earliest printed books, also mostly produced for religious or ecclesiastical ends. With the development of cheap paper and mass printing, books could be disseminated across different professions. The book ceased to be an exclusive tool of the clergy. Febvre and Martin note in their book how the ratio of the possession of books

between lawyers and churchman essentially flipped between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. While their emphasis is on the book as a “force” of change, Johns’s emphasis is on what we can call an “epistemic” revolution in the way we began to think of both knowledge and the object of knowledge that the book brought about. In Johns’s estimation, the ascendancy and dissemination of the book led us to think of nature as a book, that is, the book of nature, one that is legible and can be read by all. The book democratized knowledge and epistemology: knowledge would be accessible to all and all could be epistemic agents, or at least this was the expectation (Johns, 1998: 1–57).

The book, as a mass-produced commodity, or as Anderson put it, “the first modern style mass-produced industrial commodity” (Anderson, 1991: 34), brought about scientific and religious revolutions, but also political, social, and what we can call cognitive revolutions.<sup>2</sup> As Elizabeth L. Eisenstein has argued, the book was an element, albeit a key one, in the “communications revolution, or (most explicitly) a shift from scribal to typographical culture” (Eisenstein, 1968: 2).<sup>3</sup> All knowledge, what could be known, should be known, would be known, would be printed and made available to all. The book was a decisive element in the cognitive revolution that gave us the modern scientific, technological, and enlightenment world. Above, the book was an indispensable factor in the creation of reading publics that began to share a common literary world, or what Johns calls the “literary life” (Johns, 1998: chap. 2).

Yet, as important as the book was in the “cognitive” revolutions that gave us the Global/Modern/Colonial System, it could be argued that the newspaper was even more decisive and impactful. If the book democratized knowledge and epistemology, the newspaper was even more effective in “democratizing” knowledge and constituting “a” people as agents of both knowledge and “opinion.” In this way, the newspaper was indispensable in the constitution of the “people” not as an object of political power, but as a “subject” of political agency. Anderson notes that the newspaper was an “extreme form” of the book. Although books could become best sellers, their readership was circumscribed. They might become best sellers, but of a select readership. The newspapers, on the other hand, were and are ephemeral and yet ever present. Newspapers have morning and late editions, national and international editions, and until very recently, at least in the United States every major city or town had its own local newspaper. In this way, the newspaper was even more crucial in constituting what Anderson, following Hegel, calls a “mass ceremony.” Anderson puts it in this provocative way:

The significance of this mass ceremony—Hegel observed that newspapers serve modern man [*sic*] as a substitute for the morning prayers—is paradoxical. It is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he [*sic*] performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slighted notion . . . What more vivid figure for the secular, historically clocked, imagined community can be envisioned?” (Anderson, 1991: 35)

While we may appreciate the thrust of Anderson's claims in his rereading of Hegel's famous phrase about reading newspapers as the secular version of a mass ceremony—a figurative gathering of people under the roof of a virtual church—some corrections have to be noted. In contrast to books, which are privately consumed, newspapers were collectively and communally consumed. As Matthew J. Shaw notes in his book *An Inky Business: A History of Newspapers from the English Civil Wars to the American Civil War*, newspapers were available in coffee shops, beer halls, and as *affiches*, that is, as broadsheets that would be posted around the city and which would be read by gathered people, as if in an outdoor church. Above all, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, newspapers would be read out loud by newspaper readers to those who were illiterate or just wanted a coffee or a beer while they caught up with the world (Shaw, 2021: 121). As Andrew Pettegree notes, “printed news” created new “habits of consumption,” which linked the communal and the private (Pettegree, 2014: 11). The newspaper, more than any other “print” media, contributed to the creation of a “public” that concerned itself with what was “public.”

Thus far I have discussed the material and cognitive revolutions that the book and the newspaper brought about, thus giving birth to our Global/Modern/Colonial System. In fact, and arguably, more than books, newspapers were major factors in the creation of “global” imagined communities. Simon J. Potter, for instance, notes that newspapers were instrumental in projecting a global sense of Englishness, while also giving rise to local appropriations. Just as London became the metropolitan and imperial center of news, every colonial and imperial outpost developed its local or national newspapers (Potter, 2007: 621–46). Newspapers both globalized and glocalized. As Shaw shows, newspapers were very much “an instrument” of the nation-state-building process, and thus were decisive in the rise of nationalisms (Shaw, 2021: 14). At the same time, as newspapers integrated “empires” and “colonies,” they contributed to their distinct identities, and eventual emancipation and independence, as was exemplified by the U.S. declaration of independence from England. And, just as importantly, if not more, the globalization of the newspaper created another, or a newer, epistemic crisis: the crisis of veracity. In the age of the mass production of news and the proliferation of newspapers with their angle to peddle, there arose what we can call an “epistemic legitimation crisis.” As Pettegree shows eloquently, the rise and world dissemination of newsprint brought about the question of the reliability of the news (Pettegree, 2014: 4–8). Thus, the newspaper had centrifugal and centripetal effects: it created “publics” that were also “critical” of the very media that held them together as a public.

The communications revolutions brought about by the print revolution also had revolutionary impact on the political as such, which manifested itself in the emergence of the “public,” “public opinion” and “publicity,” “publicness,” and the “public sphere” (*Öffentlichkeit*).<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Habermas, like no other philosopher and social

theorist, already in 1962 in his classic *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, diagnosed and laid out the momentous emergence and transformation of this new entity, the public, and its form of reasoning: public reasoning (Habermas, 1989a, 1989b). For Habermas, at the most basic level, “the public sphere” appears as “a specific domain—the public domain versus the private” (Habermas, 1989b: 2). The bourgeois public sphere “may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general governing relations.” This debate took a “peculiar” and unprecedented form: “the people’s use of their reason (*öffentliches Raisonement*)” (Habermas, 1989b: 27). The public sphere, then, became the sphere for the “people’s” use of public reason in order to grant legitimacy to the exercise of political power. The public use of reason in the public sphere then became a means for the transformation of *voluntas* into *ratio*. “Public debate was supposed to transform *voluntas* into a *ratio* that in the public competition of private argument came into being as the consensus about what was practically necessary in the interest of all” (Habermas, 1989b: 83; italics in original). Public reasoning within this new social space would domesticate political power by submitting it to public debate. A people as a public reasoning within the public sphere claimed the power of supervision over government, demanding that decisions be made public. In this way, the public sphere became an engine for the transformation, and generation, of political power (Habermas, 1989b: 136–42).

Bernhard Peters, a former colleague of Habermas, offered a synoptic overview of this momentous “category” by highlighting three distinct functions. First, when combined with its counterpart concept, namely the private, the public demarcates domains of social action with their respective “normative powers”—to use that expression by James Bohman (2007: 34–35). Second, when combined with two other counterconcepts, “private” and “secret,” they demarcate distinct domains of communication and knowledge. We may then say that “public” also has an epistemic characteristic that calls for a certain kind of communication, that is, civil and public communication. Third, combining the two prior semantic characteristics of the public, and to quote Peters: “The public sphere here denotes a kind of collectivity with a particular communicative structure, or a sphere of communicative action with specifically demanding characteristics and functions” (Wessler, 2008: 33–34).

Habermas’s classic from 1962 was, of course, published before his Magnus Opus, *The Theory of Communicative Action* from 1981 (Habermas, 1984–87). Yet, it can be argued that elements of the latter work were incipient in the former. Indeed, using the terminology that Habermas would develop later, one could say that the public sphere was the horizon for communicative action, rationality, and communicative freedom. The public sphere, as a new social space with its own normative claims and powers, brought forth the idea of the publicness of reason,

of the specific use of “public” reason. In his superlative book *Öffentlichkeit: Die Politische Form des Bewusstseins* (Public Sphere: The Political Form of Consciousness), Volker Gerhardt, with the subtitle to his book, captures powerfully what Habermas meant when he argued that the public and its public sphere were a means of transforming political power into something that had to be generated by the public through public deliberation. Gerhardt also captures succinctly and poignantly the cosmopolitan intent of Habermas’s notion of the publicness of the public use of reason when he concludes his book with the chapter “Der Weltbürger als *homo publicus*,” that is, “the world citizen, or cosmopolitan citizen, as public human” (Gerhardt, 2012: 504–51).

It is well known that Niklas Luhmann was one of Habermas’s most formidable antagonists and critics. They engaged in a famous debate in the early seventies from which one could say that Habermas learned more than Luhmann.<sup>5</sup> It is often overlooked that Luhmann contributed to the conceptualization of the public, public opinion, and the public sphere. Luhmann’s position, however, is almost the polar opposite of Habermas’s. Luhmann also recognized that major social transformations had taken place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries because of the media revolutions of those centuries. The new mass communication enabled by mass media created both a public and the public sphere, which in turn brought about a new social system. The public, the public sphere, and public opinion were social forms that enable the social system to create a social reality—environment—that enables the social system to observe itself. These were mirrors of mirrors, observations of observers, which in fact created the form of the “observer.” For Luhmann, “public opinion” was “stylized as a paradox, as the invisible power of the visible” (Luhmann, 1990: 204). Most importantly, public opinion refers to the social system, and not to what may take form in the consciousness of citizens. Public opinion is the autopoiesis of the social system that is constituted by communications, and only by communications. These communications are not transfers of information, reports, or revelations from one agent to another. The communication is without communicative contents. It is merely its performance. “Communication is the creation of an emergent reality, namely society, that, for its part, resides in the continual reproduction of communication by communication” (Luhmann, 1990: 207). Therefore, according to Luhmann, public opinion, as the communication of communications, “renounces” both rationality and the irrationalities of “mass psychology” (Luhmann, 1990: 209). Nor, under the form of the freedom of the press that shapes public opinion, can it be a guarantee of “a free life of the mind” (Luhmann, 1990: 217). The media does not inform the mind, nor is it a means for constituting a “mind.”

In a later text, Luhmann would claim that mass media creates a Kantian “transcendental illusion. According to this understanding, the activity of the mass media is regarded not simply as a sequence of *operations*, but rather as a sequence of *observations* or, to be more precise, observing operation” (Luhmann, 2000: 4).

This is the social system observing itself observing. In this later text, the paradox of the invisible power of the visible now become another paradox:

However, the involvement of the mass media is indispensable when the point at issue is widespread dissemination and the possibility of anonymous and thus unpredictable uptake. As paradoxical as it may sound, this means not least, when it is a matter of generating *non-transparency* in reaction to this uptake. The effect if not the function of the mass media seems to lie, therefore, in the reproduction of non-transparency through transparency, in the reproduction of *non-transparency of effects* through the *transparency of knowledge*. This means, in other words, the reproduction of the future. (Luhmann, 2000: 103; italics in original)

Here, Luhmann seems to be echoing what Pettegree noted, namely that with the rise of the newspaper, the problem of the veracity and reliability of the media also arose. Mass media, by producing immense amounts of news and information, created the problems of what information is relevant and which news sources are reliable. In his two-volume work, *Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (which should be translated as the *Society of Society*), the summation and systematization of his social systems theory, Luhmann writes that public opinion is “neither mere fashionable opinion, as the seventeenth century saw it, nor the medium of rational enlightenment or *puissance invisible* expected to bring emancipation from tradition in the eighteenth century. It is the medium of self- and world description of the modern world. It is the ‘Holy Spirit’ of the system, the communicative availability of the results of communication” (Luhmann, 2012: 322). Thus, for Luhmann the public sphere, the public, and public opinion are not the social space where a public engages in rational deliberation, thus attempting to transform political power, or the bifurcation of two realms (private and public) with their respective normative powers. For Luhmann, on the contrary, what mass media gave birth to is to what Walter Lippmann called “phantom publics” with their respective opinion, which have neither epistemic nor rational value, nor any emancipatory character (Lippmann, 1993). Yet, Luhmann has diagnosed several of the paradoxes that are concomitant with the rise of mass communication: first, that in the name of publicness new unpublic spheres and societies emerged; second, that the public fragments, creating many publics, with all of them not necessarily sharing the same information or opinion; third, that the opinion held by these publics is as ephemeral as the news that these publics consume; fourth, that mass communication allows for the communication of massive amounts of knowledge, creating a tower of Babel with its own epistemic legitimation crises; fifth, and most poignantly, that the public sphere that was enabled by mass communication is neither the space of rational deliberation nor for the public use of reason. Most tellingly, Spanish sociologist Ignazio Izuzquiza Otero titled his comprehensive study of Luhmann *La Sociedad sin Hombres: Niklas Luhmann o la Teoría como Escandalo* (Society without Men: Niklas Luhmann or Theory as a Scandal). Indeed, notwithstanding

his voluminous oeuvre, at the center of it is not human consciousness, freedom, emancipation, liberation, or deliberation or reason (Izuzquiza Otero, 2013). The auto-poiesis of the social system does not require human consciousness, the life-world, or the practices of communication to perpetuate itself. If anything, human consciousness is a mirage, not unlike the “Holy Ghost” (Key, 1961: 8).

ON THE MEDIATIZATION/CARNIVALIZATION  
OF POLITICS AND EPISTEMIC DEFICITS  
OF THE NEW PUBLIC SPHERES

In this chapter I have been weaving a story, with a normative intent, about globalization(s), by arguing that we must consider the mestizo/decolonial global thinkers as contributing substantive insights into the Global/Modern/Colonial System, or what we can also call the coloniality of globality. Then, I turned to a consideration of the media revolutions of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, focusing on the book and newspapers, so as to arrive at what we can see were interconnected political, social, cultural, epistemic, and normative revolutions. These revolutions, the argument has been, were crystallized in the emergence of what Habermas called *Öffentlichkeit*, with all of its cognates and semantic spin-offs. Like the prior section, this third section had a focus on material conditions of possibility and how they released new normative powers and standards. The media revolutions of the last nearly six hundred years have transformed how humanity sees itself, “observes itself observing itself,” to use Luhmann’s language, but also how it generates new normative demands. In this last section, I want to turn to the question: What has happened to globalization and the public sphere in the age of computerized, Internet-enabled social media? Are we more or less globalized and still members of a reasoning and deliberating public(s)? In the age of social-media-mediated globalization(s), what happened to the reasoning public, which in Habermas’s estimation was related to the epistemic virtues of an informed, egalitarian, and deliberating public?<sup>6</sup>

Here, I want to follow but digress a bit from James Bohman’s important contributions, already cited. In his 2004 essay “Expanding Dialogue: The Internet, The Public Sphere and Prospects for Transnational Democracy,” Bohman considers the, then, utopian promises of a digital democracy enabled and potentiated by the Internet (Bohman, 2004: 131–55). While Bohman was sanguine about the utopian dimensions of the new technologies, already back in the early 2000s he noted that these new Internet-mediated interactions were having fragmenting and inequalitarian consequences. Above all, they were contributing to the fragmentation of the public sphere into public spheres, siloed and isolated publics, that eroded and etiolated the possibility of coalescing and gave rise to “public opinion.” In order to explain why this is the case, Bohman offers a brief sketch of how media technologies have transformed modern societies’ ability to communicate. He

makes a distinction among one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many forms of communication as enabled by ever more sophisticated systems of communication—although all of these possible forms of communication required material wherewithal: the runner who brought a message, the horse, the ship, the train, the telegraph, radio, television, and so on. This typology needs to be modified in view of our new social media, especially as it is enabled by the cell phone and up to 5-gig wireless networks. Living in the age of cheap, portable, and ubiquitous cell phones allows us to see that there are new modalities of communication: one-to-one, some-to-some, one-to-many, many-to-many, and no-one-to-all (as in the bots that produce and disseminate fake news and misinformation). The last two forms of communication are what is truly revolutionary in our time. The cell phone rendered all communication flat and horizontal, while also decentering and disseminating it. This is what translated into the Aesopian dream of a digital democracy with a vibrant public sphere. Yet, the Internet, the cell phone, mass social media, Tik-Tok, et cetera have given us a digital version of what Lippmann called “phantom publics.” Worst yet, and as we have witnessed in the last decade, new forms of misinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories have inundated the Internet, exacerbating what I called above the “epistemic legitimation crisis” of our global societies. Arguably, “fake news” was born with the news. Yet, we have entered a deep fog of (mis)information wars. To better illustrate what I mean, let me become a bit provincial.

Several media revolutions have taken place in the U.S. public sphere, which has been the main driver of the rise of computer-mediated communication, nonstop news, social media, and the cell phone. Arguably these revolutions date back to the launching of CNN in 1980, and to that of Fox News in 1996, which was supposed to counter the alleged liberal bias of the former. CNN would broadcast 24/7, using a format that transformed journalism. This format entailed interviewing “experts” who would present different, even competing and contrasting, opinions, perspectives, and analyses on whatever was in the news. Cable networks brought about an epistemic shift in how the news was presented and received, televised, and consumed. They turned the news into a spectacle. And further, they contributed to the undermining of the epistemic credibility of scientists and experts—that is, credible epistemic agents.

Both CNN and Fox News made it clear that the news was not simply to be reported, but in fact manufactured. They showed that everything depends on a perspective, on one’s “angle.” They showed that “news” is in the eye of the beholder, and that different eyes see different things—in fact, they may see radically different things. The “news” was no longer what was “new” every day, but what broadcasters decided was newsworthy. The relentless broadcasting of the news, the ceaseless updates on the news, the “breaking news,” the endless updates on the “developing” story, made it clear that what was the “news” one hour was always already old by the next one. In this way, the news was never “new” enough. But the uproar and

cacophony of the news also had psychosocial effects. It created a sense of menace and unease: something was always “breaking” in the world. Another consequence of the rise of 24/7 reporting was the deprofessionalization of journalism, which contributed to the carnivalization of the news. The “news” became a spectacle, a mixed martial arts match, in which personalities and experts from the Left and Right exchanged opinion-punches. All of it infantilized the news, and viewers.

With the launching of “social media” and expanding access to the Internet, five trends converged to create a new phenomenon in the U.S. public sphere: media bubbles. The five trends, potentiated by 24/7 news media, are: *subjectification*, the idea that news is in the eye of the beholder; *manufacturing*, the notion that the “news” is not reported but made by cobbling certain perspectives together; the *deprofessionalization* of journalism, which showed that one does not need to be an expert to have an opinion or perspective on what may or may not be newsworthy; fourth, the embrace of *communicative combat*: the more Rabelasian, bawdy, vulgar, and outrageous you were, the more viewers and “likes” you would receive; and, last but certainly not least, the emergence of what we can call *digital time*, that is, the time that preempts the time of deliberation and has infused in the public attention deficit disorder. This *digital time*, incidentally, is antidemocratic time, as it is a nontime of deliberation, a time of gut reaction. This phenomenon, beyond this chapter, is as important as the epistemic legitimation crisis brought about by the production of digital misinformation.

The logic unleashed by CNN, which needed its nemesis Fox News, spawned a plethora of news channels, each with its unique brand and ideological bent. If Fox News meant to counter the alleged liberal bias of CNN, a hundred other channels would counter the belligerent conservative and Republican tenor of Fox News. Civil discourse was almost nowhere to be found. Many networks took their messages directly to the Internet, where many new “news” sites began to appear. For every CNN and Fox News, a new Huffington Post (2005) or Breitbart News Networks (2007) sprouted. The old bifurcation of the public sphere between print and televised media gave way to yet another form of media: Internet media. Print media now had to compete with television media, which in turn had to compete with Internet media, a platform that certainly does not require the high overhead required by the other two forms of journalism. This catalyzed an already accelerating fragmentation and polarization of the public sphere. Suddenly each political taste could have its own channel, each subjective inclination its own platform. In a unique way, political gerrymandering, which allows politicians to select their electorate rather than the other way around, was mirrored and exacerbated by what is now taking place on social media: news channels are picked by the kind of “news” you want to consume.

Another technological revolution catalyzed social media, and this was the rise of the cell phone or so-called “smartphone.” Introduced in 1992 by IBM, but popularized and fully digitized by Apple in 2007, when the company released its iPhone,

the device has transformed not just the news, but also politics. Obama was the first president to make use of the smartphone, and all of the “apps” it ushered into the public sphere, such as Twitter, Tik-Tok, etc. It is noteworthy that Obama did tweet and, according to the Internet, his account is the most followed of all time, with 130 million followers, compared to Trump’s 15.6 million. The smartphone transformed “first” (television) and “second” screens (the computer) into a “third screen” (the mobile TV/computer), which also became both a mobile panopticon and a traveling pulpit with a megaphone. Now, anybody could follow their favorite news story, sitcom, or social media personality through instant notifications from Instagram (as of 2010) or Twitter (since 2006) or Facebook (since 2004). Every cell phone allows for a myriad of notifications.

These media revolutions, which have structurally transformed the U.S. public sphere, and arguably the World Society public spheres, enabled the weaponization of Donald Trump, the person, into Trumpism, the political phenomenon. Trumpism transcends Trump the individual. In many ways, Trump is the avatar of Trumpism. And Trumpism is a global phenomenon that manifests itself in other similar forms.

It is not coincidental that Trump is the first president to have benefited by capitalizing on a thoroughly fragmented public sphere, with media bubbles that catered to specific ideological interests. While Obama availed himself of the Internet, social media, and Twitter, he did not use these media to conduct his administration’s politics. Obama could not have used tweets in that manner because he understood he was beholden to a superior normative standard. Trump, unlike Obama, was explicitly aided by news media outlets like Fox News, Breitbart, and numerous other right-wing media outlets, websites, and personalities, such as Steven Bannon. Trump was the first president to conduct policy and make public announcements largely through Twitter. He also used TV shows to conduct some of his putative “presidential” briefings.

While “fake news”—a favorite term of derision for Trump—already existed in print media, the emergence of social media, Internet news, Twitter, and all the other virtual venues to deliver “information” (e.g., Facebook’s Newsfeed) escalated the production and dissemination of misinformation. Other phenomena that belong with “fake news” are the proliferation and dissemination of conspiracy theories. Trump was adept at labeling anything that he disliked or that challenged him, especially when he was very blatantly lying, “fake news.” He was also adept at capitalizing on the “liar’s dividend,” and at using “conspiracy theories” to his benefit and to the detriment of those he opposed or sought to undermine. He tweeted his lies and retweeted right-wing conspiracy theories. Since these were tweets, they were his speech, not formal official declarations. From reports of former White House employees, we also learned that Trump was a daily consumer of right-wing and conservative media, such as Fox News. Trump may have been the first “white president” insofar as he ran on an explicit agenda of white supremacy,

racism, xenophobia, and anti-immigration, but he was able to push this agenda because he was also the first social media and Twitter president. Trump was the avatar of right-wing social media. Like Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, the Teflon presidents before him, Trump also became a Teflon president. But a better analogy would be to say that Trump is more like a “third screen” that you could click on or swipe away; you could like his tweets and retweet them, or look away; you could swipe to the left or to the right, as if he were just another profile picture on a dating app (Match.com, or Cupid). Trump is the metonym for a new phenomenon: “digital agnotology,” namely the digital production of epistemic deficits, incredulities, epistemic bubbles, and self-incurred ignorance.

Still, as I am writing this, I can watch on CNN (which has become a global brand with global reach) the terrible destruction of Ukraine by Russian troops, the masses of people leaving the country, the indiscriminate attacks on civilians, the crimes of war being committed right before our eyes. Every day, we can hear updates on NPR about President Biden’s economic plan to rebuild the United States. Yet, we also hear about the media being shut down in Russia, the iron grip on the Internet by the Chinese Government, and the waves of misinformation about what is going on around the world. The media revolutions of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries gave us the revolutions that globalized our world, while also giving us the nationalisms that shape the direction of those globalizations. In parallel, the new media revolutions have brought us together in unprecedented ways, but also sundered and separated us in new and unsuspecting ways. We are globalized too much and not enough.

In this chapter, I profiled what I called “mestizo/decolonial” theories of globalization that are a major corrective to most theories of globalization that are projected and thought as if from above or only from the perspective of Euro-America. I argued that these “mestizo/decolonial” thinkers enabled us to rethink the “coloniality of globality,” which articulates the perspective from the underside of modernity, globalization, and colonialism. Then, I turned to a consideration of the rise of both national and transnational public spheres, through the emergence of newspapers, and what has been called a “world republic of letters.” Part and parcel of this revolution in media was the emergence of both imperial and colonial public spheres, with their distinct media. Thus, as we came to be part of “imagined” global communities of readers, many colonial subjects developed their own local media. Thus, colonization was a major force of globalization, which in turn catalyzed the creation of “decolonizing” publics and public spheres. The global public sphere is always a sphere of many publics, many of them explicitly and avowedly decolonizing or anticolonial. Then, I turned to what I called “the latest” or more recent “structural transformation” of these global public spheres by looking at the rise of social media and the impact that cell phones and the Internet have had on politics. In particular, I focused on the rise of authoritarian, xenophobic, racist, and antiglobalist publics with their own distinct politics, which have been

enabled and exacerbated by these new media. These new social media, I sought to show, globalized us while also glocalizing us into more nationalistic and xenophobic political attitudes and trends. Again, my claim is that the new material conditions of the production of the public sphere, and publics, show how we are globalized enough, but also not enough.

## NOTES

I want to thank Manfred Steger for the invitation that gave rise to this chapter. I also want to thank Martin Woessner and Santiago Zabala with whom I have corresponded about many of the ideas here discussed, and I want to thank Jürgen Habermas for sharing his latest manuscripts on the public sphere.

1. For my use of *mestizo*, see Gruzinski (2002), and for an overview of the “decolonial” critics, see my article “Critique of Decolonial Reason” (Mendieta, 2020). The best resource for the decolonial critics is Moraña (2008). Decolonial thinkers are not postcolonial thinkers, yet they are in intense dialogue with them. As for postcolonial theory, see Moore-Gilbert (1997), Gandhi (1998), and Quayson (2000).

2. And the book continues to be an agent of transformation and a transformed medium. For further thoughts on this, see my essay “From the Paperback to the Ebook” (Mendieta 2021).

3. Eisenstein’s essay is an amazing text that in my view anticipates and advances some ideas later developed by Jack Goody in *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (Goody, 1986).

4. See my entry “Public Sphere” in *The Cambridge Habermas Lexicon* (Mendieta, 2019). See also Beebe (2002). And of course, Calhoun (1992), the indispensable companion to Habermas’s classic.

5. See the excellent book on this famous debate by Gorm Harste (2021). See also Moeller (2019).

6. See Habermas (2009), an essay that was dedicated by Bernhard Peters and that should be read as a new preface to *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

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