

# KANT, THE PRESS, AND THE PUBLIC USE OF REASON

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## Abstract

Is it wise to structure critical discussion of the media around a normative ideal of publicness? This article suggests some potential problems by re-examining Kant's conception of the public use of reason, primarily as articulated in his newspaper article, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" (1784). Kant's account of the enthusiasm of a German newspaper-reading public for the French Revolution not only introduces an aesthetic dimension into political judgment, but also prefigures the strategies of media critique. The limits of "the public" as an optic through which to judge the social functions of the media are discussed in the light of Kierkegaard's phenomenology and Ian Hunter's recent excavation of the tradition of civil philosophy associated with Pufendorf and Thomasius.

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In his 1983 lectures on the Enlightenment, Michel Foucault placed his own philosophical project in a line of thought opened up in Kant's answer to the challenging question posed by the editor of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, Johan Biester, in November 1784. The question was, of course, "What Is Enlightenment?" This is how Foucault glosses Kant's response, which he sees in terms of another series of questions: "What is happening today? What is happening now? And what is this 'now' which we all inhabit, and which defines the moment in which I am writing?" (1986, 88).

Foucault argues that this question of what it means to live in the present sets a new agenda for an historically alert philosophy; that is, to articulate a systematic critical discourse on modernity. But Foucault's reading also sends us back to Kant. It prompts the question, what *was* the "now" in which Kant was writing about publicity and the press?

For many people in the "Germany" of the second half of the eighteenth century, and especially for educated and ambitious young people, the present must have seemed an uncertain and precarious moment. The immediate past was characterised by economically crippling warfare and political fragmentation, cultural particularism, and stifling moral conformism. At the same time, the principles of Enlightenment thought appeared to promise a future of liberty and outward-looking universalism. So the present of the 1770s and 1780s would have been quite widely experienced as a potential historical turning point. In this context, young men aspiring to help create a more rational and more emancipated future through state service, and also young women with similar ideals but even fewer career options, did quite literally make a practice of reflecting on the present. They would come together in the context of "reading clubs" to discuss novels – paradigmatically Goethe's *The Passions of Young Werther* in 1774, but also novels from France and England – and intellectual journals like the *Allgemeine Literatur Zeitung*. These clubs, observes Terry Pinkard (2002, 7-8), "gave young people the means to imagine a life different from the one they were leading or were seemingly destined to lead, and gave older people a means to discuss in their lodges and reading societies material that attacked arbitrary princely authority and extolled the virtues of the learned professions in general."

This emerging culture was neither court culture nor popular culture, but something new: "it was the culture of an emerging group that did not conceive of itself as bourgeois so much as it thought of itself as cultivated, learned, and, most importantly, *self-directing*" (Pinkard 2002, 7-8). This was not a culture of revered objects, conventional attitudes, or set patterns of behaviour. Rather, it was a *movement* of self-cultivation directed to creating oneself as a certain type of person in a collective setting. Its ideal was *Bildung*, that untranslatable term for the *process* of education, acculturation and developing self-direction in the face of pressures for conformity – a self-conscious attempt to become worldly, and to refine one's intelligence and taste. "The man or woman of *Bildung* was the ideal member of a reading club, and together they came to conceive of themselves as forming a 'public,' an *Öffentlichkeit*, a group of people collectively and freely arriving at judgements of goodness and badness about cultural, political, and social matters" (Pinkard 2002, 7-8).

Pinkard notes how the practices directed at fostering *Bildung* in the reading groups had affinities with many of the spiritual exercises associated with the religious phenomenon of eighteenth-century Pietism, in which Kant had been raised and educated. The dogmatism and sectarianism of religion in the various post-Westphalian statelets, and the apparently arbitrary imposition of Protestantism or Catholicism in them, prompted many believers to turn away from the established churches and follow Augustine's advice to look inward for the true message of Christianity. Pietism promoted group readings of the Bible, individual and group reflection on the voice of one's "heart" as a means of self-transformation, and a sense of personal responsibility for the reform of social ills. "Pietism also taught people to perform a kind of self-reflection that focused on keeping diaries, discussing one's experiences of faith with others, holding oneself to a principle, and, in short, learning to see whether one was *directing* one's life in accordance with God's wishes" (2002, 7-8).

## Public Use of Reason

This, according to Pinkard at least, was the receptive cultural milieu which Kant addressed with this dramatic opening answer to Biester's question: "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity." The motto of enlightenment must be, *Sapere Aude!* Dare to know. "Have the courage to use your own reason" (Kant 1991, 54, translation modified).

What, though, did "using your own reason" actually mean in this context and at that time? And, more broadly, in what circumstances is the use of reason possible? Here it is necessary to read what Kant has to say both historically and philosophically. The *Berlinische Monatsschrift* was not just in the business of publishing news and views. It had a political and social agenda. The journal represented the public face of a secret society of senior officials in the administration of Frederick II who were committed to embedding Enlightenment principles in the institutions of the Prussian state. The inference must therefore be that Kant knew exactly whom he was talking to, and that his emphasis on daring and courage in the somewhat hesitant and cryptic opening of the essay is a nod towards the risks these men would have seen themselves as taking in the attempt to create social conditions in which their fellow-citizens might be (more) free to think (Caygill 2001, 31).

At the time Kant's essay was published in 1784, they were especially concerned that their achievements should not be reversed when Frederick II, then in the 44th year of his reign, died – as he did two years later – and was replaced by his more reactionary heir. It helps to know this, as it explains the strategic nature of the essay. It is designed to make use of the press and its public access in order to help a political cause as well as to establish philosophical principles.

The philosophical basis for the argument about the public use of reason is Kant's axiomatic belief that thinking well must be based on three maxims: *Think for yourself; think from the standpoint of everyone else; and think consistently.* Respecting all or any of these maxims is possible only "in community with others to whom we *communicate* our thoughts, and who communicate their thoughts to us." Thinking is of its nature a *social* activity, then, and reason is a product of society (Wood 1999, 301). For thinking to demonstrate reason, it must be *critical*, testing what is thought from different possible perspectives in order to achieve understanding and coherence.

To a degree, and perhaps quite a considerable degree, such critical self-reflection is possible through the inner exercise of imagination. To be most effective, however, imagination needs at least some external stimulus from actual dialogue with people in relation to whose viewpoints one is trying to think. This is why, in “What Is Enlightenment?”, Kant insists that citizens have a philosophical responsibility to do their thinking in front of “the entire *reading public*” – even if his historical understanding of who should make up the public was much more discriminating (Kant 1991, 55).

Kant’s is thus an inherently *pluralistic* conception of reason: that is, it requires “the disposition of not being occupied with oneself as the entire world, but regarding and conducting oneself as a cosmopolitan [or citizen of the world]” (Wood 1999, 302). This is how he puts it in his discussion of *sensus communis* in *The Critique of Judgment*:

*The idea of a public sense, i.e., a critical faculty which in its reflective act takes account (a priori) of the mode of representation of everyone else, in order, as it were, to weigh its judgment with the collective reason of mankind, and thereby avoid the illusion arising from subjective and personal conditions which could readily be taken for objective, an illusion that would exert a prejudicial influence upon its judgment. This is accomplished by weighing the judgment, not so much with actual, as rather with the merely possible, judgments of others, and by putting ourselves in the position of everyone else, as the result of mere abstraction from the limitations which contingently affect our own estimate (cited in Splichal 2002, 101).*

Without that worldly regard for the thoughts, feelings, and wishes of others, thought and judgment fall prey to the opposite of pluralism, which is *egoism*. And egoism, whether in terms of one’s understanding, one’s tastes or one’s interests, in turn produces traits that are obstacles to moral self-development: passion, self-conceit, fear, and intellectual indolence (Wood 1999, 283).<sup>1</sup>

It is the very nature of thinking that requires its public use and an initiating act of resolution and courage if reason is to be developed in individuals and in humanity as a whole. The immaturity (*Unmündigkeit*), or intellectual and moral dependency, that is the opposite of enlightenment is not a developmental stage before maturity, but is “self-incurred” (*selbstverschuldet*) (Kant 1991, 54). Thinking adults have a choice. They have to decide between the challenging demands of reason and the comfort zone of conformity and deference to authority: “people who do not need to submit to tutelage often do so because they find it convenient to have others guide them. Being unaccustomed to think for themselves, they are often frightened by the prospect of having to do so” (Wood 1999, 305).

This is why some of the most intransigent barriers to the development of reason are to be found in ourselves. *Mündigkeit* – “adulthood,” “majority,” or “maturity” – brings with it not just the freedom and assurance of autonomy, but also its attendant anxieties, risks and responsibilities. As Kant strategically acknowledges, however, the roadblocks to enlightenment are external as well as internal. It is in the interests of tyrants, priests, and other often more benevolent powers to tell people what to think, to tell them what will make them safe and happy, and so to perpetuate their deference and dependency. Their most effective weapon is, of course, the ability to play on spiritual, social and economic fears. Having “carefully

prevented the docile creatures from daring to take single step without the leading-strings to which they are tied”, such authorities will attempt to “show them the danger which threatens them if they try to walk unaided” (Wood 1999, 305-306). Kant does not deny the existence of such dangers and discontents, but sees them simply as part and parcel of the human condition, as obstacles that need to be overcome: “they would certainly learn to walk eventually after a few falls” (Kant 1991, 54). And “learning to walk” means taking on those social impediments as well as well as one’s own fears.

Kant sees it as our duty to opt for maturity: a duty to ourselves, because to opt for tutelage and dependency is personally degrading, but also a kind of species-duty, in the sense that reason can exist and fulfil its vocation in human history only through free rational communication between independent thinkers (Wood 1999, 306). Kant’s philosophy was radical in its emphasis on the spontaneity and autonomy of human beings, and it was this that found an affinity with an emerging cultural sense of people’s potential – and desire – for subjective development and collective progress. As Pinkard (2002, 19) puts it, he “captured a deep, almost subterranean shift in what his audience was coming to experience as necessary for themselves: from now on, we were called to lead our own lives, to think for ourselves.” Historically, the question is whether, how and to what extent the dissemination of Kant’s philosophical ideas helped to articulate that ethos as a social force. From that point of view, what is electric in Kant’s account of that “now” are his comments about the social circumstances that are necessary if such courage is to lead to autonomy.

When Kant observes that “for enlightenment of this kind, all that is needed is freedom,” he is not just talking about overcoming the psychological comforts of immaturity and the inner tyranny of superstition and timidity, but also about all too real and familiar ideological pressures and political-legal obstacles to free communication, to the operation of reason, and so to human progress (Kant 1991, 55; Wood 1999, 283).<sup>2</sup> Hence the need for courage, but also the need for the existence of social circumstances that made daring to use one’s reason a possibility. Because we can develop our reason only by communicating with others, and as the development of reason in human society depends on its public use, therefore Kant defends freedom of public communication as an absolute precondition for the collective development of people’s rational powers and so for human progress (Wood 1999, 306). The freedom to communicate, asserts Kant, is “the one treasure which remains to us amidst all the burdens of civil life, and which alone offers us a means of overcoming all the evils of this condition” (in Reiss 1991, 247). To prohibit the use of public reason, however, is not only “to injure and trample on the rights of mankind.” In a subtle argument – or a piece of opportunist flattery, depending on how you look at it – Kant makes the case that such restriction is also against the interests of an enlightened ruler who “is not afraid of shadows [or phantoms].” It is, after all, the public use of critical reason alone that can foster enlightenment, and so create a population that is likely to be peaceful and virtuous.

*A prince who does not regard it as beneath him to say that he considers it his duty, in religious matters, not to prescribe anything to his people, but to allow them complete freedom, a prince who thus even declines to accept the presumptuous title of tolerant, is himself enlightened. ... This spirit of freedom*

*is also spreading abroad, even where it has to struggle with outward obstacles imposed by governments which misunderstand their own function. For such governments can now witness a shining example of how freedom may exist without in the least jeopardising public concord and the unity of the commonwealth. Men will of their own accord gradually work their way out of barbarism so long as artificial measures are not deliberately adopted to keep them in it (Kant 1991, 58-59).*

Just as individuals need to think their way out of tutelage and towards maturity, so the general development from an “age of enlightenment” to an “enlightened age” requires a polity that not only allows, but encourages criticism of existing political institutions as part of the development and expansion of reason.

## Publicity and Freedom

This account of freedom of communication as the indispensable forum for the public use of reason is often taken, not unreasonably given our present historical perspective, to be not just a defence of freedom of *expression* but also, by extension, a defence of the freedom of *the press* as such. When Kant does explicitly defend freedom of the press, however, he is actually talking about freedom of authorship and publication (*die Freiheit der Feder*, freedom of the pen) in the particular context of citizens having a right to publicise abuse, injustice or errors in the administration of the state. In other words, he is talking about public exposure, rather than a necessary feature of the public conceived as a forum of learned debate and communication. Kant suggests that,

*Consequently the right must be conceded to the citizen, and with the direct consent of the sovereign, that he shall be able to make his opinion publicly known regarding what appears to him to be a wrong committed against the commonwealth by the enactments and administration of the sovereign. For to assume that the sovereign power can never err, or never be ignorant of anything, would amount to regarding that power as favoured with heavenly inspiration and as exalted above the reach of mankind, which is absurd. Hence the liberty of the press (*die Freiheit der Feder*) is the sole palladium of the rights of the people (in Splichal 2002, 107).*

Given this distinction between publicity as exposure and publicness as critical deliberation, it is worth looking more closely at the way Kant defines the public, and examining how broadly or narrowly he conceives of its membership and its freedoms.

Kant defends the freedom of *public communication* solely as a precondition for the *public use of reason*, and so as a means to the end of collective human emancipation. He makes no case for the freedom of individuals (or newspapers, for that matter) to voice opinions, prejudices and beliefs that would demonstrate or perpetuate their self-incurred minority or dependency. As commentators have repeatedly noted, sometimes with a degree of embarrassment, much of the discussion in “What is Enlightenment?” is taken up by Kant’s acknowledgement of the circumstances in which constraints on civil freedom are not only legitimate, but may actually help to promote people’s intellectual freedom during the period of becoming progressively enlightened (Wood 1999, 306). Which sort of restriction on free-

dom to make public use of one's reason prevents enlightenment, he asks, "and which, instead of hindering it, *can actually promote it?*" (Kant 1991, 55, emphasis added). The desirable possible outcomes of free communication need to be weighed against equally pressing needs, most notably the preservation of social order, the exercise of civil authority and the rule of law that are themselves also preconditions for the progress of reason.

A social space in which unconstrained communication is to take place, a space at once conceptual and institutional, therefore needs to be imaginatively devised, but quite narrowly drawn. This is the sphere of publicness, a space defined primarily in terms of the printed word and scholarship. It is a space that institutionalises the logic of a reading public in the practices of media and universities. The members of this public must use their freedom (and privileges) carefully if they want to hold onto to them. In "What Is Enlightenment?" the boundaries Kant sets to this public can appear bewilderingly elastic. Sometimes he seems to be addressing the people he knows are likely to be reading the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*. Sometimes he sees the public use of reason being restricted to the "scholar or man of letters" (*Gelehrte*). But then he claims that such intellectuals are addressing "the entire *reading public*," and thus, as he goes on to say, a potentially cosmopolitan public – nothing less than "a scholar addressing the real public (i.e. the world at large)" (Kant 1991, 57). Kant, it appears, wants to retain the principle of an all-embracing public, but at the same time he wants to be sure he gets his message across to his target audience.

The public use of reason is discursively as well as socially constrained. Scholars should address only the intellects and consciences of their interlocutors, and not, above all, their passions or self-interest (Wood 1999, 307; Reiss 1991, 55). It is not just the more obvious forms of rabble-rousing that are off limits. He sees no place for stirring up opposition to government policies or for collective political organisation. If those in power, however unjust or unreasonable, are to be persuaded to change policies or relinquish power, it can only be by means of the persuasive force of reason. These limitations prompt Allen Wood to sympathise with J.G. Hamann's satirical barb at the time that Kant's public use of reason is no more than a rich pudding to be enjoyed only after the private use of reason has supplied one's daily bread (Wood 1999, 308).

By the *private use of reason*, in what may appear a counterintuitive usage, Kant means what a person should be permitted to think or say "in a particular *civil* post or office with which he is entrusted" (Kant 1991, 55). Here "obedience is imperative" (Kant, 1991, 56). An army officer has absolutely and without question to obey orders, although as a "man of learning" he *should* question their wisdom. A citizen cannot refuse to pay taxes, but as "a learned individual" he can question their justice. A clergyman must teach the orthodoxy of his denomination, but as "a scholar" he can challenge its truth. It is this relationship between public and private that leads to Kant's other, pragmatic motto of enlightenment: "*Argue as much as you like and about whatever you like, but obey!*" Kant thus distinguishes between, on the one hand, a public sphere whose privileged right of unfettered intellectual exchange is limited to the learned and, on the other, a private – we might today say *corporate* – sphere where enforced conformity is not only legitimate but beneficial: "a lesser degree of civil freedom gives intellectual freedom enough room to develop to its

fullest extent" (Kant 1991, 59). It is true that Kant envisages this arrangement as a transitional phase in the progress of the human species. In an age of enlightenment, in Kant's sense of a movement towards a fully *enlightened* epoch, the task of philosophy, as enacted and refined through the public use of reason, is to identify rational collective ends and to propose social institutions that will support that movement. When that enlightened age dawns, the exercise of civil authority will become redundant, and the persona of the scholar will displace that of sovereign and subject (Hunter 2001, 376). In the present, however, Kant characterises the public as the socially more restrictive sphere and the private as the sphere in which speech and communication are more repressively policed. The oddity of this mapping – Kant has nothing to say about what freedom should be allowed in "private" conversations between friends or in the family – makes sense only in the light of two factors: not only the political constraints on the medium in which he was writing, but also his philosophical view of the function of the public. Any actually existing public has to be considered from the point of view of teleology; that is, as a precursor to, and even a means of progress towards, the full development of an ethical community. This is how Allen W. Wood explains it.

*For Kant it is crucial that human beings think of themselves as belonging to a moral community, of which all rational beings could regard themselves as members. This community is to be united through the concept of a single final end that its members consciously pursue in common as a shared end. Such a community could be called "the realm of ends" if it represented "only an ideal". However, it is vital to Kant's ethical thought that such a community should not remain that but should also acquire actual earthly reality in human history (Wood 1999, 313).*

In this light (so Ian Hunter argues) – that is, if the public of scholars and intellectuals is seen as "an avatar of Kant's spiritual community and as an analogue of his ethical state" – then it no longer appears a mystery that "the official use of reason, for the purposes of church and state, indeed appears limited and restricted – 'private' in comparison with the spontaneous and transparent 'public' communications of the community of pure intelligences" (2001, 376).

The extent to which *the public* not only prefigures the *ethical* or *moral* or *spiritual community*, but actually contributes to its realisation, is again at issue in another text that touches on the question of the press and its functions. It also throws light on what, in practice, might be involved in the public use of reason, and also hints, no doubt unintentionally, at why the history of the media did not follow the path foreshadowed by Kant.

## A Media Public

To find an example of what he sees as novel and defining in Kant's philosophy – the quest for maturity through critical reflection on modernity – Foucault turns from "What is Enlightenment?" to the second dissertation in *The Contest of Faculties*, the last work published in Kant's lifetime, in 1798. Here the conflict between the Faculty of Philosophy and the Faculty of Law is articulated around a question that links the nature of an existing public to a future community. The question is this: "Is the human race continually progressing?" (Kant 1991a, 177; translation modified).



Kant looks around him for a sign that this might be the case. He finds it in one of the great historical events of his time – the French Revolution, which took place in 1789, five years after “What is Enlightenment?” was published. Kant does not reflect on the parallels between that political revolution and the philosophical revolution he had caused.<sup>3</sup> Nor does he debate whether the revolution in itself was a good or a bad thing. Rather, the sign of progress that Kant perceives in these momentous events may appear at first sight to be somewhat tangential. It is to be found, he argues, in the widespread feeling of *enthusiasm* provoked by the Revolution. The important thing is the way that citizens “in states and national groups” respond to what he calls the *drama* of the Revolution, the way it is generally perceived and judged by – again Kant’s term – *spectators* who do not take part in it but observe it from a distance. What matters is thus less the Revolution in itself than the perception of it, and a response to it, by “disinterested” people who themselves take no active part in it.

How is Kant’s response to the French Revolution relevant to an understanding of the modern media? Note first how the historical event has been translated into a *spectacle* or *drama* through the work of representation; or rather, that it is only through representation that it is constituted *as* an event. Note too that the event is represented as a drama for an *audience*. In a gesture that prefigures media studies, Kant turns his attention away from the event itself towards its status as what we might now call a *media event*, and focuses especially on its representation and the way that this mediated event provokes a response from its audience of *distant spectators*.<sup>4</sup> Why does he do that?

He does so because these spectators constitute a particular type of audience: once again, a *public*. “We are here concerned,” Kant writes, “only with the attitude of the onlookers as it reveals itself *in public* while the drama of great political changes is taking place” (Kant 1991a, 182). What is so important about this public? Is it that its members meet face-to-face for informed conversations in coffee houses about newspaper articles, discuss the ethical implications of their decisions in board rooms or presbyteries, or hold scholarly dialogues in universities? Not really, or certainly not only that. In *The Contest of Faculties*, at least, Kant envisages a public defined not just by the use of reason, but a public of citizens who come together as spectators. Their spectatorship does not mean that they are a passive audience, however. Nor, although distant, are they marginal. What then do these spectators do that makes them a public? The implication is that the spectacularisation and visibility of historical-political events allow, and perhaps demand, a new mode of political judgement among them – still a public use of reason, but here given a new twist. In this case, the spectators have no direct stake in the Revolution. They have nothing to gain through its success nor (so far as Kant tells us) anything to lose by its failure. It is above all the sublimity of the Revolution that provokes their enthusiasm, and it is this disinterested enthusiasm which prompts Kant to believe that there is “a moral disposition within the human race” which is in turn the grounds for accepting the idea of human progress.

What emerges from Kant’s ruminations on the French Revolution is a new cultural-political configuration: the historical event as dramatic spectacle; an audience of distant and diffuse spectators; and a mode of judgement that sustains the new force of public opinion. What is needed to make this new dynamic of moder-

nity work? The philosophical answer is Kant's ethical teleology, the sense that the enthusiasm of this educated (and so limited) public for a moment of emancipation does indeed prefigure a universal ethical community. In media studies terms, what makes this function of publicity possible is, of course, the existence of certain techniques for disseminating information. The medium of the press both represents the event, thus making it available as a topic of rational deliberation, and provides an effective forum for the articulation of the public opinion that emerges from such deliberation. Although Kant is not talking about emotional empathy for people in distant places, it is nonetheless clear in retrospect that, as the public enthusiasm for the Revolution is evoked by the dramatic spectacle it presents, this must be seen to a significant extent as an act of *aesthetic* judgement. Although Kant fails to acknowledge it, this is a decisive moment in the history of public opinion. The aesthetic is conflated with the political, and from the bottle of enlightened public reason there silently materialises the genie of mass enthusiasm.

### What's Wrong with the Public?

In his important book *Principles of Publicity and Press Freedom*, Slavko Splichal contrasts two different conceptions of press freedom, and two traditions of thought that support them. One view, which Splichal associates with Kant, sees freedom of the press as an aspect of freedom of personal expression and communication – a right (and a duty) of citizens to use their reason and publish their conclusions in the public medium of the press. This, adds Splichal, was a road not taken (2002, 95). The opposing view sees the press as a component of Jeremy Bentham's "system of distrust." In line with his dismal desire that everything should be transparent to everyone, Bentham's idea was that, on behalf of and with the consent of the people, the press should be an instrument for scrutinising and exposing the actions of governments. Hence all the rhetoric about watchdogs, the fourth estate, and "the public's right to know" that has underpinned claims to independence and privilege by the commercial press and subsequent media. In this tradition, the press is conceived as a corporate entity serving supposedly collective (public) interests, not as a forum for public deliberation. As Splichal puts it,

*Unlike individual freedom of expression, freedom of the press became seen – particularly by professionals in the media and communication – as freedom of journalists, editors, or publishing corporations, based on the argument that the press pursues important functions for society and/or citizens, thus being an "instrument" for the realization of other citizen rights and freedoms (Splichal 2002, 84).*

Although this particular judgement, like Splichal's argument in general, is persuasive, my reading of Kant suggests some slight differences of emphasis which then raise some larger questions.

I think that it is important, for example, not to overemphasise the supposed incompatibility between an emphasis on freedom of expression and communication and the watchdog function. At the end of "What Is Enlightenment?" – in his cunning eulogy to Frederick's wisdom in tolerating the public expression of critical opinions – Kant attempts to defend both existing and desired political freedoms as well as a philosophical principle.

*But the attitude of mind of a head of state who favours freedom in the arts and sciences extends even further, for he realises that there is no danger even to his legislation if he allows his subjects to make public use of their own reason and to put before the public their thoughts on better ways of drawing up laws, even if this entails forthright criticism of the current legislation (Kant 1991, 59).*

The public use to which reason should be put, then, is at least in part the criticism of social institutions. Kant had already spelled this out in the Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781.

*Our age is, in especial degree, the age of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit. Religion through its sanctity, and law giving through its majesty, may seek to exempt themselves from it. But they then awaken just suspicion, and cannot claim the sincere respect which reason accords only to that which has been able to sustain the test of free and open examination (in Caygill 1995, 8).*

Kant too wanted some watchdogs to keep the powerful on the straight and narrow, it seems, just like Bentham. There is a significant difference, however, between scrutiny by a critical philosophy, and the threat of exposure by journalists regardless of the good or bad faith of the people being exposed and the rationality of their actions.

This then leads to questions about means, ends, and actors. In part, it is a matter of priorities. Which is more important, the function of exposure and criticism or the rights of expression and communication? The ideal, of course, is to get the two in alignment. That is what lies behind the various proposals for a reformed media that would embody something like Kant's vision of the rational and informed public talking to itself – the Habermasian tradition in media studies, we might say. In this vein, Splichal writes (2002, 189), "A democratic system should provide informed decisions on public issues, and this can only happen on the basis of an open information and communication system that allows for the personal right of public expression." That implies a public of active and participating citizens contributing to newspapers and presumably publishing their own output. It is also an egalitarian vision. Splichal continues (2002, 189), "The true sense of democratic regulation of communications is *equal availability* of influence on different forms of public communication, particularly mass media, to *all citizens*, so that no citizen would have more institutionally guaranteed influence over public (or collective) affairs than any other." This egalitarianism is clearly at odds with Kant's rather narrow (although, as I have acknowledged, elastic) conception of who should have a say in the reading public, based as it was on a hierarchy of learning.

Splichal's view also entails what might be called an empiricist conception of the public, thereby raising the tricky question of what kind of thing a public is. Like many other people who share his vision of a more participatory and so more democratic media, Splichal tends to see the public in terms of mobilised and active citizens. But do publics have this sort of concrete existence? As Michael Warner has neatly observed (2002, 8), echoing Benedict Anderson's ontology of nations, "publics exist only by virtue of their imagining." In a way, it has been the self-interested newspaper proprietors and editors on the watchdog side of the argument who

have been more acutely (if not always self-consciously) attuned to this insight. They have only been able to get away with their endlessly repeated equation between corporate unaccountability and freedom of expression – as if their protected status were an *instance* of that freedom rather than a potential (if seldom activated) support for it – because they have recognised that *the public*, like *the people*, exists purely as a nominal principle of legitimation rather than a collection of living, breathing people. In the Benthamite-capitalist tradition, in other words, the *public* function of the press operates as a purely conceptual justification for its privileges, and the people who actually buy newspapers have been transformed into, on the one hand, *consumers*, and, on the other, a *readership* on offer to advertisers.

Bentham takes a utilitarian view of the press. If it is suitably alert, it will make those in power think twice before misbehaving. Although Kant may sometimes appear to defend the freedom of expression and communication as an end in themselves, I would argue that his limited defence of such freedom as a prerequisite for critical public thought is just as rigorously *consequentialist* as is Bentham's promotion of a distrustful, resentful press. Kant does not defend everybody's right to express any opinion. On the contrary, he defends only the public use of reason insofar as it enables men of letters to discover and agree on what is true – exposing inequity and injustice as barriers to enlightenment along the way – and thus to promote human progress as he conceived it. For him, the aim is not administrative efficiency and social welfare, as it was for Bentham, but a quite different conception of human progress, one in which liberal institutional means are very much subservient to metaphysical ends. In other words, Kant sees the privileged discursive freedom of the public sphere as valuable and defensible only insofar as it helps to make an earthly reality of the freely adopted moral community that would eventually, in principle, encompass the whole human race. The logic of his views about publicness runs from freedom of the press, to freedom of expression, to public use of reason, to public sphere, to ethical community, and ultimately to the uniting of the human race into an achieved Kingdom of God on earth. And it would probably be more true to that logic to start the sequence at the other end: that is, if it contributes to establishing the Kingdom of God, then the ethical community is necessary; if it makes the ethical community possible, the enlightened use of critical reason in the public sphere is defensible; and, if they are preconditions for an effective public sphere, then freedom of expression and publication in the press are desirable.

When Splichal quite rightly says that Kant's conception of the press represents a road not taken, the utopian implication may seem to be that we would be better off if only we could rewind history, and begin again from Kant. Against that, Wood's judgement on the genealogy and tendency of Kant's thinking gives pause for thought. It points to an apparently ineradicable residue of metaphysical thinking in conceptions of politics and political participation. That faith in politics in turn helps to explain the over-investment in the ideal of publicness and tenaciously utopian expectations about the social role the media can or should play. Wood notes:

*Looking back to the century that preceded it, Kant's view of history looks like a rationalistic version of the apocalypse expected by egalitarian German pietism. Looking ahead to the next two centuries, it might just as easily be interpreted in terms of Marxian communism or, as some neo-Kantians did in*

*the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as a radical socialist vision lying at the heart of Kantian ethics and showing itself more explicitly in Kant's religious thought* (Wood 1999, 319-320).

For me, two questions follow from this. First, how useful is it to view the development of the press and the public during the nineteenth century through this Kantian optic, posed as it is between pietism and millenarian socialism? And second, assuming for the sake of argument that it might be possible, would reconfiguring the media around the principle of a Kantian public be sensible as a political option or as a philosophical ideal?

## Kierkegaard

An interesting insight into the first question is to be found, I think, in the views of that disappointed Hegelian, Søren Kierkegaard. His line is that, far from being the road to salvation, the public – which he sees as the *product* of the press, and not just its audience – is the source of all our woes. Reviewing a novel entitled, *The Present Age* in 1846, and using the occasion to reflect critically (or at least ironically) on the present, Kierkegaard argues (2001, 82; Dreyfus 2001, 760) that, far from developing the individual or enriching communal life, the existence of the public diminishes them by leaching them of any particular identities or passionate commitments. Because it embodies universalist values, the public “eats up all the relative and concrete in individuality.” In other words, “The public is not a people, a generation, one’s era, nor a religious community, a society, nor such and such particular people, for all these are what they are only by virtue of what is concrete. No, not a single one of those who belong to the public has an essential engagement in anything” (Kierkegaard 2001, 82-83; Dreyfus 2001, 77).

Kierkegaard’s objection to the press and its public is thus as much phenomenological as it is political. He dismisses the public as a *phantom*, an amorphous entity with no substance or identity, not a collection of real embodied people talking to each other and interacting spiritually, emotionally, and physically with each other. Kierkegaard warns that the present age, with its newspapers and its public, “transforms the task itself into an unreal feat of artifice, and reality into a theatre” (in Dreyfuss 2001, 88). For Kierkegaard, publicness filters the passion – and so the politics – out of politics.

In his gloss on Hegel’s famous aphorism that “Reading the morning paper is a kind of realistic morning prayer” (in Pinkard 2000, 242), Benedict Anderson makes a related (though less polemical) observation. Whether performed in the café or club, the subway or barbershop, or over the breakfast table at home, reading the morning paper is the ritual through which modern man both develops and demonstrates his capacity to act as a member of the public. Reading the paper becomes an act of disenchanting communion, an affirmation of belonging – but belonging to what? To a significant extent, newspaper readers are a pragmatic community, using the information it contains to find out about vacant jobs, houses for sale, stock prices, the times and venues for entertainment and sports events. To some degree, however, reading a national or metropolitan newspaper can still offer a means of establishing a certain shared orientation to the world, keeping abreast of current affairs and world news. But it is here above all, suggests Anderson (1991, 35-36),

that “fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations.” The public produced by the professionalised commercial press of the nineteenth century can thus be seen as quite different from the one envisioned by Kant. Rather than acting as the forum for unfettered communication between men of letters, this public was increasingly anonymous, egoistic, and (in the way people read news stories) driven by a particular type of distracted aesthetic or emotional identification rather than the use of reason.

The great image for this process is to be found in Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*. Madame Verdurin, the socially ambitious but irredeemably bourgeois hostess, sits reading *Le Figaro* over her elegant breakfast. As she absorbs the news about the sinking of the *Lusitania* and the number of people drowned, she utters, “*Quelle horreur!*” At the same time, however, as she dips her croissant into her *café au lait*, the look that passes across her face is one of sweet contentment (“*une douce satisfaction*”). This lack of affect in response to tragic but distant historical events might be denounced as the frivolity or bad faith of a particular class (and a particular gender?) in a certain type of society. Alternatively, and less moralistically, it might be seen more in terms of a changing dynamic between temporal immediacy and emotional dissociation in mediated forms of worldly engagement.

In his recent book *On the Internet*, Hubert Dreyfus invokes Kierkegaard to express the concern that because the press and then broadcasting and now the Internet make “every sort of information immediately available to anyone,” they produce “a desituated, detached spectator” who experience things only in mediated form, at a distance, rather than directly through the body (2001, 76). Although *detached spectatorship* may seem to describe quite well what Kant’s fellow-citizens in Königsberg were doing as they reflected enthusiastically on the French Revolution, in Dreyfus’s judgment, relating to *the world* through teletechnology inevitably corrupts our overall sense of reality, while telepresence diminishes our everyday experience of being in the presence of things and people. He worries that the Internet tempts us “to live in a world of stimulating images and simulated commitments and thus to lead a simulated life” – what Kierkegaard (2001, 97) denounces as *the dizziness of abstract infinity*.

The argument is that real commitments and real affiliations or enthusiasms are undermined if they become detached from embodied personal interaction. To the extent that the dominant historical forms of publicness from the nineteenth century have been increasingly mediated through technologies, the ideal of the public use of reason in a real marketplace, coffee house, or debating chamber is held to have been first diluted and then degraded. Although, as I say, this is really a phenomenological objection, it does resurface in many discussions of the media and publicness. My reading of Kant’s own comments in *The Conflict of the Faculties* suggests that he, for one, would not have seen the imagined, technologically mediated, or now virtual nature of the public as the decisive factor. The key question for him would be its teleological orientation, not the medium of communication.

### Civil vs. Metaphysical Philosophy

This brings me to my second question: the value or desirability of a Kantian conception of the public as a normative principle for thinking about media in our

times. Let me approach this in a roundabout way. When reading Kant's account of the conflict between the Faculty of Philosophy and the Faculty of Law, I was for a long time baffled why Kant should see the particular question of human progress as the point of contention, and rather uncertain what the alternative argument put forward by the Lawyers might actually be. Kant hardly spells it out for his reader. In many accounts of that debate, it seems to be taken for granted that the Law Faculty had no case in its defence. The vocational faculty is presumed to be just in the cynical business of meeting the market demand for lawyers.

In his recent, iconoclastic book *Rival Enlightenments*, Hunter suggests that this is far from being the case. Hunter's revisionist purpose is to reinstate the seventeenth century civil philosophy associated with Samuel Pufendorf and Christian Thomasius to its proper eminence in the intellectual history of early modern Germany, and so, necessarily, to put Kant in his place as a philosopher who perpetuated the tradition of university metaphysics, rather than transcending it. Hunter's narrative thus challenges the view of the Enlightenment and its aftermath written by what he sees as the victors – the heirs of Kant.

Pufendorf attributed the origins of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) in large part to the encroachment of religion into the sphere of civil government. To preempt any recurrence of that, to "deconfessionalise" or "desacralise" politics, Pufendorf therefore envisaged a state (or "civil kingdom"), based on a doctrine of natural law (*Staatsrecht*), rigorously separated from both the sphere of religious governance, and from the sphere of life in which the pursuit of moral perfection took place (the "kingdom of truth"). This desacralised version of the state limited its functions to two. It pursued external security through diplomacy and war. Equally, it vigorously pursued the internal security of the state. The latter it did in two ways. First, the state remained scrupulously indifferent to the beliefs and values of the various moral communities existing within it. It established a private sphere of negative civil freedom, as it were. Second, the state acted to suppress all conduct threatening to social peace, no matter what its source (Hunter 2001, 15). The tradition of university metaphysics in which Kant should properly be placed, argues Hunter, was a reaction against this secular civil philosophy and its restriction of questions of faith to the private sphere in order to keep religion out of politics. He writes:

*Leibniz, Wolff and Kant all attempted to provide a secular equivalent for religion – in the form of their own natural theologies – through which they hoped to provide a moral basis for a resacralised state. Shocked by the central political construct of the early modern civil sciences – the secular security state – the metaphysicians sought to preserve their conception of a world still governed by the transcendent justice of the heavenly city. They did so by refurbishing a longstanding Christian conception of political order – the figure of the church as the "kingdom of God on earth" – thereby initiating a powerful anti-political, anti-juridical theory of "society" (Hunter 2001, 26-27).*

It is in this context that the particular – one might say *local* – conflict between the Königsberg Philosopher Kant and his colleagues in the Law Faculty begins to make sense. Although often assumed to have been rendered irrelevant in the seven-  
teen twenties, the civil philosophy of Pufendorf and Thomasius continued to

shape the education of jurists and political officials in universities like Halle and Göttingen. It certainly remained a decisive influence, apparently, on the foundation program offered by Reinhold Sahme and his fellow-jurists at Königsberg during Kant's tenure there. Against what Hunter not unreasonably sees as Kant's attempt "to rebuild society in the image of the church", the Law Faculty was intent on preparing its students for the self-discipline, administrative skills and political craft necessary for their future careers as state officials. This required a break from "scholastic" modes of thinking, and above all an urgent sense of the need to avoid any return to internecine sectarianism and religious warfare by securing effective secular institutions in the government of the territorial state (Hunter 2001, 272-273).

In this context, the logic of Kant's question about continual progress of the human race starts to come into focus, as do the stakes in the conflict between the Philosophy and Law faculties. It is in no small measure a collegial turf war, and Kant makes his pitch against the opposition in familiar terms. He argues:

*Popular enlightenment is the public instruction of the people upon their duties and rights towards the state to which they belong. Since this concerns only natural rights and rights which can be derived from ordinary common sense, their obvious exponents and interpreters among the people will not be officials appointed by the state [i.e. not the Law Faculty – J.D.], but free teachers of right, i.e. the philosophers. The latter, on account of the very freedom which they allow themselves, are a stumbling-block to the state, whose only wish is to rule; they are accordingly given the appellation of "enlighteners", and decried as a menace to the state. And yet they do not address themselves in familiar tones to the people (who themselves take little or no notice of them and their writings), but in respectful tones to the state, which is thereby implored to take the rightful needs of the people to heart. And if a whole people wishes to present its grievance (gravamen), the only way in which this can be done is by publicity. A ban on publicity will therefore hinder a nation's progress, even with regard to the least of its claims, the claim for natural rights (Kant 1991a, 186).*

Hunter offers an intriguingly sceptical reading of Kant's own brush with censorship over his *Religion with the Bounds of Mere Reason*, suggesting that what lay behind it may have been as much Kant's quite deliberate attempt to whittle away at the Prussian state's longstanding policy of securing religious peace by remaining neutral between rival confessions, as any clash between enlightened, rational philosophy and an irrational state apparatus imposing religious orthodoxy (2001, 338ff). Leaving the rights and wrongs of that particular dispute to one side, Hunter insists that a choice needs to be made between the rival enlightenments of Pufendorf and Kant; that is, between a secular, liberal (and admittedly often authoritarian) state, and Kant's neo-confessional community. Here is how Hunter indicates his own preference:

*It is ... in envisaging the moral renovation of political governance through the figure of the rational community – the figure known today as "rational communication in the public sphere" – that Kantian metaphysics assumes its full neo-confessional form. For here, an anti-political enclave politics, grounded*



*in the metaphysics of rational community, envisages its own expansion into the "true visible church" (Hunter 2001, 376).*

Despite his barbed allusion there to the Habermasian tradition, Hunter for the most part is careful to avoid the sort of conceptual jump-cuts across time that I have indulged in here. Even so, his account of the metaphysical teleology of Kant's *public* and *ethical community* – which, as we have seen, is shared in a less critical way by a Kantian like Allen Wood – does help to bring into focus my scepticism about the wisdom of focusing media debates around the question of the public sphere.

## Present and Past

It would be interesting to know what contemporary lessons, if any, Hunter would derive from his critique of Kant's "anti-political" politics. I suspect that he might be reluctant to codify them. The implication of his approach is that we should take not just the metaphysics, but quite a lot of the philosophy out of our media histories. Rather than speculating how newspaper texts, newspaper publics, or regimes of media regulation might embody philosophical perspectives, he implies that we should get back to the archives to study the policies and practices of news organisations, the strategic logic of legislation covering public expression, communication and publication, and the ways in which the press has been recruited to facilitate the management of populations.

Equally, though, at this late stage, I cannot see how we could easily get Kant out of our system – not just our systems of thinking and of politics, but especially the way we still experience ourselves as self-legislating but ethically divided beings. It is because they are so systematically embedded in the way we live and think that I have here tried to work through Kant's ideas about the public and the press, rather than finding a way around them. And that principle brings us back to the lesson that Foucault took from Kant: the intellectual responsibility to reflect on the present.

*I wonder whether we may not envisage modernity rather as an attitude than as a period of history. And by "attitude" I mean a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task. A bit, no doubt, like what the Greeks called an ethos. And consequently, rather than seeking to distinguish the "modern era" from the "premodern" or the "postmodern," I think it would be more useful to find out how the attitude of modernity, ever since its formation, has found itself struggling with attitudes of "countermodernity" (Foucault 1984, 39).*

In rereading Kant on the press and the public use of reason in this spirit, my purpose has been not to dismiss the potent fiction of *the public*, but rather to reflect on its implications, to draw out some of the tensions within the concept and its history, and to question the received wisdom about its purposes and consequences.

One legacy of Kantian thinking about the public is a split in the way that we think about politics. On the one hand, we observe the theatre of parliaments and the sophisticated arts of statecraft, a distant spectacle mediated to us through the

conventions of a superficially critical but structurally collusive watchdog media. On the other hand, we retain a romantic, quasi-metaphysical conception of politics as a sphere of ethical self-formation as well as a means to social transformation. This is embodied in two ways. One is a public sphere of informed and participating citizens. The other is an activist sphere of parties, movements and demonstrations, memorialised in an archive of alternative media and increasingly wired through the Internet. Whether this is an accurate or reassuring picture of politics today is not really the issue. The key point, yet again, is the impossibility of working with any singular conception of the public. The history of communication, it therefore seems to me, is better written in terms of multiple rival modernities, the dynamic between publics and counterpublics, and imaginable functions for the media in a different politics.<sup>5</sup>

## Notes:

1. Hence Wood's view that "to consider Kant's philosophy as 'monological' or 'solipsistic' [as Habermas and his followers do] is *fundamentally* to misunderstand the Kantian conception of reason."
2. Pressure from the new regime of Frederick II and police harassment of its editor would lead to the closure of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in 1792, for example.
3. Many young intellectuals, it seems, saw in Kant's thoughts about spontaneity and autonomy the promise of an equally dramatic – though bloodless – overthrow of Germany's past. Decades later, Heinrich Heine would portray Kant as a Jacobin of philosophy, as ruthless in his own field as the Terror had been in France (Pinkard 2002, 82ff).
4. Kant stresses that he is commenting from "a country more than a hundred miles removed from the scene of the Revolution" (Kant 1991a, 183). On media events and distant audiences, see, for example, Dayan and Katz 1994, and Thompson 1996.
5. There is, for example, some very interesting historical research into the role of a Jewish press in the formation of a Jewish public sphere (primarily but not exclusively in Germany) in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. See, for example, Schwarz 2002. I am grateful to Joachim Schlör for this reference. On more contemporary counterpublics, see Warner 2002.

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