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Georgia Gioltzidou

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The Convergence of Public and Private Sphere in the context of the new Digital Era: The role of radio

Georgia Gioltzidou*

Abstract

Since the 19th century, radio has earned a characterization not only as a fast-moving medium of broadcast news, information, education and entertainment, but also as an interactive medium of the Public Sphere. New media however have transformed the meaning of Public Sphere, as well as the role of traditional media throughout the world. Radio, as a representative of the old media group, is in the midst of a new era. It has struggled to resist the rise of television, but also withstood the rise of the internet and the digital revolution. Radio still remains significant in the socio-cultural but also political landscape worldwide. The purpose of this study is to investigate whether radio confirms its role as a medium which is part of the Public Sphere but also if and how it constitutes a point of convergence of Public and Private Sphere within the competitive context of the new digital era. Through in-depth interviews with professional journalists, this research aims also to scrutinize the current role of radio in the Private Sphere and the extent of its influence upon it. The research concludes that radio still occupies a pivotal position among the factors that cause and enhance the convergence of the Private and Public sphere. Listeners and journalists are on the same side, the one of investing on the radio and helping it to transform and modernize.

Keywords: journalism, media, radio, public sphere, private sphere.

Defining the Public Sphere

The role of Public Sphere has increasingly come to the fore in studies concerning mass media. Comparative studies between traditional media and new digital media are on the rise, with recent literature thoroughly documenting the shift in media dynamics and its impact on the public sphere (Garnham, 2020). In our attempt to approximate the relationship of radio with the Public and the Private Sphere, it is appropriate to clarify the definitions of the two concepts as well as the reasons why these terms have penetrated so much in the academic research.

According to Habermas (1964), "Public Sphere" predominantly denotes a realm of our social life where a semblance of public opinion can arise. He suggests that a fragment of the public sphere emerges whenever private individuals gather to create a collective entity.

* Georgia Gioltzidou, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece.

Why is the term “Public Sphere” so often used? The significance of this term is due to four key factors. The first is the fascination with historical democratic passion, especially in the founding role of the press in the creation of bourgeois democracies. A second reason is the fact that, according to the theory of Habermas, in the public sphere the citizen himself is the protagonist. A third reason is the thorough presentation of the role of the press in the three recent centuries. Finally, a fourth reason is the promotion and connection of the concept of public sphere as an idiosyncratic of the ancient “Athenian assembly” (Kaitatzi, 2012). By comparing the term Public Sphere and the structural role of the radio, we understand better the reasons why expanding these concepts is necessary in order to identify the points to which they relate.

Why do we need the concept of the public sphere? The reason is that it allows linking the political decision-making process with the process shaping public opinion. Public opinion is a concept that means much more than the totality of the views of individuals who make up a society: it is a concept that focuses on both the content of their views, their mechanisms of formation, and their transmission to political power (Hrisanthopoulos, 2015). Additionally, a healthy Public Sphere is linked to a healthy democracy and a healthy media system. Chambers and Costain (2000) contend that robust democracies require a vibrant public sphere, where individuals can share ideas, gain understanding and information, address public issues, demand public transparency, deliberate on policy matters, question authority without fear of retaliation, and uphold fundamental principles. So, the connection between democracy and media system is extremely coherent (McNair, 2006). In this sense, radio can be approximated as a pillar and modulator of democracy.

According to Webster (2004), the implications of current developments are better understood and the re-evaluation of public service is better served by looking at the problem from the perspective of the theory of the Public Sphere. The Public Sphere requires a space in which information may be freely developed, discussed and disseminated so that the public may make decisions on confident grounds. Radio offers a unique platform where the exchange of views can be expressed most effectively.

When we speak about this space, we usually mean the public space, or else the Public Sphere, which is a broad concept that affects almost every aspect of public and social life. Although it is difficult to create a list of all those in the Public Sphere, we decidedly know that newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere (Habermas, 1964). Therefore, the connection of the public sphere with mass media is obvious. If we accept the opinion of Habermas that there is a trend of weakening of the public sphere by the extension of fundamental rights in the social welfare state, then we assume that the foundations of the Public Sphere as well as the foundations of the mass media are under threat.

Defining the Private Sphere

As early as the 18th century, the distinction between the Public and the Private Sphere was introduced. From then on, the distinction between issues and dialogues that are ratified as public and those that have no place in the public sphere begins (Miloni, 2006). In any case it is easier to identify what is part of the private sphere, rather than exclude what is not.

The term “private sphere” refers to the most intimate aspects of human experience. (Thornton, 2014). Donnelly (2014:1) defines it as “the partially private sphere”, where private actors undertake governmental functions or offer public services following governmental outsourcing or privatization, and the “wholly private sphere”, which pertains to interactions among private actors. Another definition of the word ‘private’ is ‘belonging to or for the use of one particular person or group of people only’. Public life is governed by shared norms and values, whereas private life constitutes the realm of the intimate, personal identity, and free will (Chandler and Munday, 2011). However, the bond between the Public and the Private Sphere is extremely strong, but also under challenge.

The challenge or else the problem with the public sphere, lies in the fact that the Public Sphere and the private community have been constructed as opposing concepts. Can we disengage these two concepts? According to Leggewie and Maar (1998) the relationship between the private and the public sphere is profound and its character is critical.

Does private sphere lose its meaning when it opens up to the public? According to Emilio Mordini (2008:1), it does not. As he notices “Privacy is not in what we hide but in having the power to hide something”. These academic approaches as regards Private Sphere, makes it clear that any studies attempting to integrate the media, and in particular the radio, into just one sphere, must renounce the stereotypes that designate the two spaces - Private and Public – as independent and isolated.

Defining the convergence of Public and Private Sphere

Public and private spheres are neither unrelated nor independent from each other. They could appear as two spheres tangent to each other, but also as two spheres that one lies inside the other. The public sphere acts as a mediator between the private sphere and the realm of public authority, and especially in modern societies, constitutes a "theatrical scene" in which political participation is disciplined; an area of social life in which public opinion is formed (Hrisanthopoulos, 2015).

Furthermore, according to Stevenson (2002:49), who suggests that "the Public Sphere and the press allow individuals to critically examine themselves and the actions of the government," we can infer that public discourse has been supplanted by "the gradual privatization of civic

engagement and the reduction of significant public issues to trivial matters" (Harcup, 2009). One more time we understand the utopia of the disconnection of the two spheres.

Of course, the connection of the two, does not mean that there is homogeneity. Private Sphere is indeed considered to be a more sensitive area, whether Public is characterized by definition, more tolerant and broadminded. However, the balance between Public and Private Sphere is essential. If we consider radio to have a place in both spheres, then we must clearly define the boundaries, not for the purpose of separation, but of understanding.

Most civic behaviors originate in private environments and may be broadcast publicly. The private expressions of citizenship that may be broadcast in public bear variable democratizing consequences. The Private Sphere is the focal point of the civic activity that develops, whether it remains within private confines or is broadcast to publicly positioned audiences and entities. (Papacharissi, 2010:16).

This transmission to which Papacharissi (2010) refers to, is the key point on which we base the perspective that radio is a point of union between private environment and public field. Freedom and democracy can be more appropriately cultivated in an environment where radio has the potential to move from one place to another and offer its services by combining the central aspects of the Public and Private Sphere. That is why intense study about radio is vital.

Defining the role of the radio as part of the Public and Private Sphere

Radio is characterized by some very important and special elements. In the plethora of studies on the evolution of mass media there is too often a lack of focus on radio as a determining factor in the new media era (Bondebjerg, Madsen, 2008). Radio is a fast – moving medium of broadcasting news for both listeners and journalists. There are very few opportunities to ask questions, challenge information, or make comparisons in a field where deadlines are literally down to the last second. The radio journalist is dependent on the phone clock and the studio clock (Crook, 1998), working under very strict time constraints and leaving little room for flexibility or adjustments. Recently there have been breathtaking developments in the areas of radio broadcasting. Consequently, radio and the profession of radio journalism should be considered as a separate field of research.

Competition and political dynamics are converging to create a rapidly changing environment for radio. The journalist, on the other hand, holds a crucial role in any society to report truthfully and convey information to fellow citizens about events that violate human decency. Radio plays “an enormous role in this continuing battle” (Crook, 1998:11). In this battle, news belongs to both public and private sphere. Radio is frequently the channel through which news is transmitted among them. Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan (2010) describes news as information that is new and

pertains to an event or issue and Current affairs as issue-centered, and thus less focused on specific events in its approach to covering public life compared to hard news journalism.

Since its inception, radio has been a catalyst for information, communication and freedom (Jeanneney, 1996). Furthermore, journalism works for an aspect of democracy. Media do the same. Radio does the same. Can we place radio only in one Sphere? It would likely be too perilous.

Methodology

This research focuses on the personal experiences of journalists who are on the field, working as radio producers and covering different types of reportings. As for the selection of the journalists, we chose one from each of the following types of reporting: political, cultural, athletic and local government. The purpose for choosing these samples was to identify whether the different types of reporting influence the point of view of the journalists on the issue of placing radio in the Public and Private Spheres. Additionally, the aim of the study was to investigate if, how, and in what extent, the convergence of the Public and Private sphere is achieved through radio. The empirical research included personal in depth and semi-structured interviews with journalists who work on a daily basis on radio stations and specifically on the 958fm and 102fm radio stations of ERT (Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation).

As regards the interviewers, V.P. deals with Political Reportage, G.K. with Cultural, G.D. with Sports and D.K. with Local Government. For the sake of time saving, we use the following abbreviations when referring to the four journalists: Pol. for Political, Cult. for Cultural, Sports and L.G. for Local Government.

To apply this method, we employed an interview guide, which included the basic topics covered during the interview. Our goal was to create a climate of trust with the journalists. The guide included not more than eight questions in order for this to be the main axis of the issues for the discussion during the interview. The basic thematics that journalists were asked about are: 1) definition of Public and the Private Sphere as places where radio can exist, 2) convergence of Public and Private Sphere, as revealed by the type of reporting they work on 3) changes on the interactivity of the radio and on convergence of the two Spheres, over the years, 4) specific examples that prove the convergence or not of the two spheres, 5) the future of radio as a determining factor for the convergence of the two Spheres, 6) suggestions in order for radio to flourish. The interviews were transcribed verbatim from the recordings verbatim and the material was categorized according to the 6 themes above.

Results of the research

How radio journalists perceive the concepts of Public and Private Sphere

Winocur (2005) argues that radio listening is a private act, one that may be individual or collective but one that almost always takes place within the family and domestic sphere”. The first subject of the study was how the journalists define themselves the Public and Private Sphere.

On the question ‘How would you define the Public and the Private Sphere?’ the answers provided reflect a variety of perspectives on the distinction between the public and private spheres, highlighting the complexity of defining these concepts in contemporary society. The public sphere is generally associated with what is shared, discussed, or concerns the wider community, encompassing social and political activities that impact society at large. On the other hand, the private sphere is traditionally linked to personal, intimate, and home-based activities, focusing on individual experiences that are less accessible to public scrutiny. However, there is a recurring theme among the responses that the boundaries between the public and private spheres are increasingly blurred.

“I don't have the exact definitions but I would say that the Public Sphere is everything we share and Private Sphere is everything that takes place in our home. (...) There is a question of whether politicians must have privacy in their life and whether this must be protected. It has been decided that the family of public figures and their family members have immunity, while those involved in public life themselves, do not. Their Private Sphere is made Public, as long as it concerns the citizens.” Pol.

“Public is what refers to many. Private sphere is personal contact.” Athl.

“I think there are no clear boundaries between the Private and Public spheres, no matter what scientists say. As things have evolved, even the private is part of the Public Sphere, whether admitted or not. The Private Sphere cannot be completely isolated from the public realm, because the public realm today affects the private realm far more than ever.” Cult.

“Nowadays, it is very difficult to define the Private Sphere. In the past, things were clearer. What was in the narrow environment of a person was the Private Sphere, and those in the wider environment were the Public Sphere. (...) I would define the Public as a large sphere and the Private ones as smaller ones within the Public Sphere.” L.G.

These varying definitions underscore that the delineation between public and private spheres is not fixed but fluid, influenced by cultural, social, and technological factors. This complexity is particularly evident in discussions about privacy rights, media scrutiny, and the impact of digital communication on personal life.

4.2 Does traditional radio cause the two spheres to converge?

Communication requires convergence. This is a way that public and private are attracted. In this sense personalization can be located on various levels of the communication process though radio. This approach of Landert (2004:10) is in harmony with what most of radio journalists agree on.

“The convergence of public and private though media generally is becoming more and more intense. (...) Listeners generally communicate though the traditional radio. Either to speak generally on the air or to speak only to the journalist (...). This creates an interaction between the journalist and the listener.” Pol.

“I find radio to be primarily a part of the Public Sphere. It has a mainly public role. (...) When I am in the microphone of the radio, I feel that I am addressing each and every Private Sphere separately. This affects me because I do not feel that I am speaking to a mob. I try to give the listeners the feeling that I'm talking to each one of them individually.” Athl.

“Everything that is said through the microphone, through the radio, is necessarily seen through the Private Sphere which seeks or wants to touch the Public Sphere. In this way, I believe that radio is a part of the coupling of public and private space, but perhaps less than in the previous years, where radio was the only mean of direct communication. (...) Through the radio, the Private Sphere becomes public and then private again. It's a complex shape.” Cult.

“Radio is a way to connect the Private Spheres to the public. If this thing works both ways then we are talking about success. Usually through the radio the Public Sphere approaches the private. The reverse happens, but not continuously. It happens mainly on private radios. (...) Private radios are more participatory and the problem of the private sphere is sometimes easier to be transferred to the Public Sphere. (...) This has to do with the nature of the program, of course. If the station is purely informative, communication with the audience is diminished.” L.G.

Although all journalists agree on the issue of setting radio in the midst of Public and Private Sphere, the journalists who work on Local Government reportage and Cultural are more convinced that this convergence is largely achieved.

The role of the audience in promoting the convergence of their Private with the Public Sphere

Radio is considered as the “grandfather” of mass communication. Radio communication exerts a profound influence on our daily lives. It entertains us with music and dialogue, keeps us informed about the latest news and weather updates, and has the power to sway our opinions and beliefs. But could it also function similarly to a psychologist? What are some causations that can mobilize the listeners to express themselves thus promote the convergence of their private sphere with the public one? The opinions, experiences and views on this matter do not converge. The perspectives shared emphasize the significant role of radio in bridging the public and private spheres, underlining the idea that communication inherently requires convergence.

“More often people want to speak about the personal problems. (...) This can be done for many reasons, from personal vanity to monetary gain. Most listeners who have an interactive radio communication are usually older.” L.G.

“There interest increases when there are strong political situations, such as elections or political tension. Two very intense periods of public participation were in 1989 with the Koskoto scandal and another was in the summer of 2015 with the referendum in Greece. And of course, always during the elections. There was a strong interest in joining the group in 1996 with the Imia case. In the years of financial crisis and memoranda, the world turns to the radio for personal problems, such as unemployment, financial hardship, professional difficulties, problems created in the family environment. On these matters the problems left the walls of the house and went out into the Public Sphere, from wherever a public step was taken, whether radio or social media. Private was made public. When you lose your job and face family problems, everything becomes public. You have nothing to lose. You have no problem in referring to your situation in public. Something you wouldn't put out at a different time.” Pol.

Although the journalists who deal with politics and local government see problems and negative circumstances as those motivating listeners, the sports journalist finds movement in major sporting events, whether they are positive or not.

“Usually on the eve or the next day of a race the audience is more expressive. Listeners are waiting to hear what they want to hear on the radio. This is mainly the case in sports reporting. The listeners want to hear that their team is the best, that it has not created any bad episodes, it loses only because it is wronged and it never wins any favor when it wins. A large number of people call the reporter over the phone and say so. It motivates them.” Athl.

On the other hand, the journalist who covers cultural issues, stresses out that audience in motivated not because of negative events but because of the pure need of expression which results from literature or art.

“Another case of the convergence of the Private Sphere with the public is that the listener sends a book to the journalist who deals with cultural reporting. It is a need that the private has to be made public. Anyway, every time someone publishes a book, the private gets public, but sending it to the radio producer shows an even greater need for the private to become public. It is the need of the individual to occupy a greater part of the public space.” Cult.

The initiative of journalists to converge the two spheres over radio

Frequently the radio journalist is called upon to reach out to the listener, to become his friend and to reduce the distance between them (Gazi, 2001:207). This of course helps converge the public and private spheres. Moreover, journalism and especially radio journalism is not only about telling

the news. Personal elements are often expressed through radio. When this comes from the audience side we tend to comprehend. When the personalization comes from the journalists' side it looks weird. However even when it is not intended to happen, the personal speckle might be obvious. As Landert (2004:10) argues "a story can be told from the point of view of directly affected individuals, emphasizing personal experiences and emotions". This is just one of the numerous ways that radio journalists merge the private and public spheres by eliminating personal elements. However, not all radio journalists are willing to open their heart through the microphone, although they wish their listeners to do so. Journalists encourage listeners to share their private sphere within the public sphere through radio. But are they willing to do the same? Do they prefer to promote the convergence of the two spheres over radio via their personal example? As the results show, they very rarely do so.

"I try to avoid expressing my private sphere in public via radio. At one point I had expressed an experience of mine about a tender and sensitive time of my life. It was the rehabilitation of this experience. However, it is needless to say, that my son became ill or my mother deals with health problems. I do not go into this logic. I express emotions. As years pass by on the radio, you're not so cold, so tough..." Cult.

"From the microphone I have only once said something very personal. Sometimes I remember it and cry. It was during an athletic event and I was on the air, making fun of something. Suddenly, that very moment I felt that I wanted to express my gratitude to my fellow colleagues. It was when my brother died ..." Athl.

"No matter how much I tried to keep a distance for many years, it inevitably happened. For example, I've mentioned a fine I got from the police because I was driving too fast. I have also mentioned cases where I or relatives have been hospitalized, but usually I try to refer to the experience and not the protagonists. In many cases I am referring to incidents without mentioning the source." Pol.

Maybe the only exception is the journalist who covers local government reportage. As we mentioned before the audience of this particular journalist is willing to express quite more than the others. This might be a reason why the journalist is motivated to do the same.

"Too often I express my personal things on the radio. (...) A personal incident that concerns the world is the one I will mention from the microphone. Many times, even listeners at that time, have told me that they have had a similar experience. (...) When I refer to news, I know I must not express my feelings. But in a daily show, however, I can express emotions. I mainly express my indignation and many more." L. G.

Parts of their private sphere that listeners most often express

Radio works in totally different ways than the other mass media. One of the most common element of diversity is that of ‘blindness’ – the fact that it provides no visual images of the thing it refers to (Starkey, Crisell, 2009:102). Does this element prove that there is a communicative limitation on the radio? Does it contain an obstacle for the listeners to expose their private sphere to the public one? According to the journalists, the listeners often take the initiative to express feelings or to share personal stories. A push lever for them to address to the radio station and to interfere or meddle in, is their neediness for communication. They want to talk to someone. So frequently the convergence of private and public sphere is a result of an inner need.

As regards listeners opening their heart on radio, while being on air, most journalists agree that people more often express negatively or even aggressively.

“Very rarely do listeners talk about something personal. It has happened sometimes but rarely. This is mainly what older listeners do. They need to talk to someone. (...) On the radio, listeners will express their Private Sphere in an indirect way. They will say their point of view. There are 2 categories of listeners. The ones who will speak kindly and give you their opinion and are others who are aggressive from the start and usually take cover and use expressions that are unacceptable. Listeners pull out their souls. In this sense there is convergence of the public and private sphere.” Athl.

“Listeners often express emotions on the radio. Sometimes even with their silences. The fact that a listener may not pick up the phone or send a message is still a powerful message. Listeners of course express themselves through messages, phone calls and letters, but silences are also very strong.” Cult.

“Personal issues. (...) is There is no obscurity. When a problem is reported, even the disclosure of personal information is almost certain. For example, in a kindergarten issue, a listener will report his or her personal problem, where his or her child goes to school, and what problem he or she is facing. The listener will also talk about his mother who is ill. He will convey his problem assuming he speaks in his neighborhood because the issue is of local interest.” L.G.

One issue that is different and is worthy of special attention has to do with the kind of radio broadcasts. All broadcasts are not the same. This is appropriately pointed out by the journalist who deals with local government reporting.

“Company shows, that is, those that are not of journalistic interest, and especially those that take place in the afternoon or evening, create the conditions for reporting personal matters more easily. Morning hours are more academic and there are usually more complaints and complaints. (...) Most often, listeners express anger. This is the driving force. The indignation usually makes a listener call the radio and express themselves. And usually listeners express opinions. They want to say their point of view.” L.G.

Challenges and future of the radio as a component of Public and Private Sphere's convergence

Each journalist comment on how the radio will regain its glory, how it can withstand the competition of new media and how it can grow in the future.

“The radio must approach reality from the beginning and from the road. The radio producer must go where the private sphere is and transfer it to the public. This is the solution.” L.G.

“We need to open the microphones. There is a level that must not be surpassed because the news transmitted by the microphone must have an elementary junction. When you directly transmit what a listener tells you then there is no junction. (...) There has always been and still is a danger in converging the two balls. (...) People want to hear, but they also want to talk. Convergence is gaining more and more ground.” Pol.

Some journalists seem more optimistic about the future role of the radio while others are afraid that the fight is uneven.

“The radio has enormous power to bring the Public and Private Spheres close together. I'm not afraid of the future of radio. It cannot lose its power because people will listen to the radio wherever they are. This has to do with the immediacy of the medium. I don't think the radio will ever go out.” Athl.

“I don't know how things will turn out. We are in a chaotic situation right now. There is internet radio, online newspapers, but also print and classic radio, facebook, internet television (...) Perhaps the radio should make the best use of it, the most versatile and the most intelligent, all other means. Not as forms of information, but as forms of communication.” Cult.

Traditional radio and the new internet mass media

In many ways radio has always seemed as the friendliest of all media. Unlike television, radio doesn't impose on us the need for forced laughter or melodramatic reactions. Instead, it provides exactly what we need or desire.

Internet mass media differ significantly because they encompass more than just voice or sound. They usually combine many visual and audio aspects (McInerney, 2001 ; Wei et al, 2022). This fact focuses on radio and its ability to handle issues and ideas without visual distraction, thus achieving a more effectively performance (Starkey, Crisell, 2009). The radio journalist who covers local government commends on a very important and particular point of radio's uniqueness. This statement seems to be the more optimistic one.

“The relationship of the radio to the new media is different, not competitive. Anyone seeing the title will click on it. In the newspaper you can read the headline quickly and if you don't like it, you don't buy it. On the radio you can never know what follows or if a perfect song will be

delivered. On the radio you choose a complete package with speech and music. If you're bored, you just change it. On the internet you can fly from here to there and just snap. But the information you find there, is not cross-referenced. This is a major difference with radio. Things are more protected.” L. G.

Conclusions

Radio is not dying. The special features and unique characteristics of radio make it a powerful and compelling mass medium that servers communication and does not operate competitively but rather works complementary with other media. Radio occupies a pivotal position among the factors that cause and enhance the convergence of the Private and Public sphere. The first bibliographic part of our study proves that there is a great need for updated surveys as regards the survival, development and longevity of radio. The second empirical section revealed that radio still holds promise. Although the different type of reporting on the radio differentiates and distinguishes the personal experiences of the journalists, they all agree that radio can play an important role as a fixed point of convergence of Public and Private Sphere. They also emphasize the influence that radio has on the lives and personalities of the listeners and how much they are still eager to participate in a public conversation, to approach the radios’ Public Sphere and to share personal elements thought a medium they trust. Listeners and journalists are on the same side, the one of investing on the radio and helping it to transform and modernize. The developments are running fast and soon there might be a time when we will not separate traditional from digital media, but we will only talk about media of human communication. Until that time, more research is needed in order for the scientific community to identify the dangers and protect the radio as an enduring value of democracy and prosperity.

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