THERE IS NO PUBLIC SPHERE WITHOUT A PUBLIC
// An interview with Slavko Splichal

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The reader may have the initial impression that I have done a pretty bad job as an interviewer, especially concerning the research undertaken prior to our meeting. As I reached the very final, complementary question, after almost ninety minutes of interviewing, asking Professor Slavko Splichal – who has been an outstanding scholar within the field of media and communication studies for more than thirty years now: "Are there any additional issues, or fields, that you think we should talk about that we have not touched upon yet?" He answered: "Well, we actually didn't talk that much about media."

Fortunately, however, it is in fact possible to interpret the potentially embarrassing situation in a somewhat different way, that makes it less humiliating to the interviewer: The reason why we "didn't talk much about media" might actually tell quite a lot about Slavko Splichal's intellectual orientation. His longstanding interests in, and academic activities around, fundamental social scientific concepts, such as *the public, public sphere* and *public opinion* have made the media such an integrated, natural part of his analytical frames of reference, that one does not need to address them specifically. Hence, the media are in fact present at all times, in all dimensions of Splichal's analyses of contemporary society, even though the interviewer forgets to use them as explicit points of departure when asking questions. Or to put it slightly differently: the media are central to, but also decentralised in Slavko Splichal's theoretical universe. They are understood and analysed as important institutions, that – for good and for bad – are inextricably linked to *democracy,* but at the end of the day it is the latter that appears to be the Slovenian scholar's uttermost intellectual concern (cf. Splichal et al. 1990; Splichal – Wasko 1993).

This interest in issues concerning the interplay between media and democracy has gained visibility in Splichal's international publications. It was of central concern in his writings on the democratic development within the former socialist countries in Eastern Europe (Splichal 1994) and it was equally present in his critical analyses of the so-called "information society" in the 1990s (Splichal et al. 1994). It was furthermore, arguably, the key issue in his critical analysis of the development of the notion of public opinion (Splichal 1999). In this context it is also definitely worth mentioning that such concerns also resound very evidently in Splichal's mission with the international journal *Javnost – The Public,* which he has edited since 1994.

To be more precise, the actual connection between these concepts (*the public, public sphere, public opinion,* etc.) and the media is a subject that he developed more thoroughly in the interview; they indeed form its focal points. Unlike in the above mentioned publications, during the interview he also specifically emphasised the transnational dimension, asking questions such as: What are the contemporary prospects for a transnational public and a transnational public sphere? These questions are also of central concern in his new book, which he finalised only two days before the interview took place (in Slovenia on 25 August 2010). Hence, the interview could not possibly start anywhere else.

What's your new book about?
The final title will probably be *National Publics in the Transnational Public Sphere*. There are quite a number of more theoretical issues which I raise in the book. The first part is about – as I call it – *the universe of publicness*. So what's the connection between different activities and places and general notions, such as *of being public, publicity* and *public relations*? In a way the book is actually pretty much about a history of the concepts, how the meanings of these terms have changed during history. What I'm mostly interested in is: What's the general tendency? Most generally I would say that the general tendency is a kind of corruption of *publicness*. The concept is perhaps a bit idealistic, but my vision is that at the beginning there was this grand vision of *publicity* – publicity as an activity and publicness in general. This idea of publicness was never put into practice, it was never realised. But since the beginning of the twentieth century there have been more and more attempts on the theoretical level to redefine publicness in ways that fit with what is happening in practice. I consider it really damaging, for both theory and for communication practices within journalism and the media. The most typical case is that the initial idea of freedom to publish, which was the citizens' right, a personal right, has been transformed into the idea of freedom of the press, which isn't a personal right but rather a kind of privilege for those who happen to be owners of the media. The same happened with publicity. At the beginning publicity meant activities to enable surveillance of the parliament. If you look at dictionaries nowadays, publicity has got a trivial meaning. It just means that you make something public to attract some attention. I think that something similar is also happening to the idea of a *public sphere*. The public sphere is a very controversial term and it has been used in very different ways. I'm particularly interested in what's happened to the concept *the public*, which was the dominant concept at least until the 1930s, after the rise of the public sphere concept. It was dominant even until after WWII actually, but then – with the famous translation of Habermas' work into English (Habermas 1989) – the term actually disappeared from scholarly journals, and everything is about public spheres and nothing is about publics anymore. So what does it actually mean? Basically, the problem is – as I see it – that the public sphere is becoming very much a neutral concept, compared to the public as a specific grouping, a specific social group with some specific functions. I mean, there are special activities attributed to that group, the public, particularly in terms of its relation to the state and its discursive reflexivity.

When you say public, do you mean public as in for instance John Dewey's sense of the word?
Well, the best definition ever of the public is Dewey's (Dewey 1927). As Dewey suggested, *the public* appears when certain numbers of people are becoming aware of important consequences of some transactions in which they were not involved. This idea of consciousness – and the specific transactions happening out there without the knowledge of the people, who suddenly become familiar with some consequences – this is, of course, becoming really important in the age of globalisation. Ecological problems, weather changes, and these kinds of things are – I would say – typical things around which publics can be constituted. We're suddenly confronted with the fact that something has happened and we didn't have anything to do with that. But there are, of course, individuals, groups, states, even corporations who must be somehow responsible for that. I mean, important decisions were made, in different places, in different periods of time, and their

consequences are now affecting us. I think this is really important to our understanding of what the public actually is about. Now, in contrast to that, the public sphere… As I said before, it's very difficult to speak about its definition in singular, because there are diffe-rent authors who define the concept quite differently, but generally speaking there is this difference that the public is an active group, in contrast to the public sphere*,* which is a neutral space. The most important issues related to the public sphere are usually the is-sues concerning access and openness. These are, of course, important issues, but they are far from being the most important ones. I mean, if you open up a space, then you open it up for different actors and those actors with the highest amount of power will prevail within that space, and this is not the public at all afterwards. The key issue is actually: Who are the actors in this public sphere and what has actually happened with the public?

Is it a bit like: There is a need for more public within the public sphere?
Exactly. I mean, one of the first sentences of my new book is actually Habermas' sentence, saying that: "There is no public sphere without a public." Still, there are a substantial num-ber of articles and books discussing the public sphere without the public. All the actors are supposed to have all the same rights, there are no special requirements for the public sphere to appear, but of course in practice there are huge differences between diffe-rent groups, even different subpopulations. This is a thing that we will have to reconsider in the future. I think the notion of social classes has totally but unjustly disappeared from the social sciences since, let's say, the late 1970s, as a part of this praise of human friendly capitalism, which we experienced in the 1980s. The situation is becoming really bad in the former socialist countries, because the kind of capitalism developing in these countries is similar to what the situation was in Western countries in the late 19th century. So the level of unemployment is ten to twenty percent, and some countries are getting close to thirty percent. The differences in salaries are also a problem. It's not a healthy situation. During globalisation the question of social classes is becoming an important issue again.

Referring to one of the concepts in the title of your new book, *transnational*. What do you have to say about that?
Initially, the idea was to write a book about the European public sphere, or the Europeani-sation of public spheres. But during this period eventually I realised that Europeanisation is actually quite a controversial term, and it's thus also problematic to talk about a Euro-pean public sphere. What I thought at that time was that Europeanisation could be consi-dered a special case, or a kind of operational concept of transnationalisation of the public sphere, that transnationalisation would be the general concept and then you would have Europeanisation and then you would also have Asianisation or whatever – various exam-ples of regional transnationalisation. But it is a problem on the theoretical level as transna-tionalisation. However, Europeanisation may be also a form of *internationalization* which leads to multinational relationships between nation-states and their "representatives", such as governments, while *transnationalisation* refers to de-nationalized, global relation-ships between governmental and non-governmental, individual and collective actors from the local to transnational level whose decisive feature is that they don't belong to a specific nation-state. Another problem is that transnationalisation is supposed to be the negation of the former national public sphere. When we refer to the Europeanisation of the public sphere, however, we are actually coming to a pretty much similar [configuration of state]

processes as in the development of national public spheres. The only difference is that there are no national borders, but there are instead other borders – European ones. This is exactly what the national public sphere is about. So in all this Europeanisation, Europeanisation also becomes a negation of transnationalisation of the public sphere, because transnationalisation, in the original sense of the word, would by definition not be related to a geopolitical concept of a state. There is not a state, but rather another super-state geopolitical formation, and I don't think that makes any real theoretical difference. So when we are talking about Europeanisation, we are basically caught within the same ideas that were fundamental to the idea of national public spheres.

So, theoretically speaking, Europe appears as a very big nation?
Yes, in a sense, and with very closed borders. If you compare it with the permeability of national borders twenty or thirty years ago, the level of permeability was higher, the borders of the European Union are less permeable nowadays. The experiences are actually horrifying, if you think of what is happening with those illegal immigrants who would like to enter "the zone of freedom". EU seems like a reservation! So the book is not so much about Europeanisation except for the discussion of the concept, so it's more about how traditional, national publics could enter, or should enter into broader public spheres.

One of the key issues in this debate is that national public spheres are supposed to have become irrelevant, because power no longer exists within national governments. The power is globalised, and the centres of power are transnational, so national publics are no longer functional, according to this idea. What I think is important is to transform these national publics in order to enable them to act transnationally. I don't mean to say that national publics should remain, or that this form of national publics is the fundamental form of publics for the future, but I would say that before a new generation of publics will develop, national publics are still the most powerful actors for critical action. I mean, the efficiency of communicative action is higher if the actions are related to national governments compared to other decision making bodies outside of the nation state. National publics are very, very powerful and it is of course important that national publics should interact with each other across borders. It's hard to imagine that you would see something like a European public. I don't see it, certainly not now. It's actually very difficult to imagine how this could exist. But, on the other hand, there are possibilities that national publics, from different countries, could in a way unite when they are exposed to similar consequences of transactions. I mean in ecology, for example. The responsibility of national governments would be to enable, or to make national publics more efficient. A key question is of course about the media, and not least the Internet. What are the consequences of the Internet? There's this idea about the Internet, and the consequences of the Internet, which I'm very sceptical about, and that's the argument that the Internet actually could generate a special, new type of an online public sphere. I do not think that's true. If you look at the history of the media and public spheres, nothing substantially has happened with publics because of the media. The media have not revolutionised the public. At the very beginning of course, with the launch of the press, that was actually the condition for the public to exist in the strict sense of the concept, the public and the public sphere didn't exist before the press. But afterwards, with the technological changes. … On the one hand, you can see all the changes in the field of communication, in terms of technology mostly, and on the other … if you look at what has happened with the public and the public sphere, you will see that there is no one-to-one relationship,

and the reason is that there is no direct interaction. There are all kinds of factors media-
ting between technological changes and changes in the public sphere – political, eco-
nomic… Somehow everything is of course interconnected. So the point is that technolo-
gical changes themselves cannot simply be considered a cause of changes in the public
sphere. What is worse is that despite those brilliant technological changes, the chan-
ges in the public sphere are not so brilliant at all. So if you compared the early stage
of the public sphere with the present stage, you would actually see that the situation is
in some aspects worse than it was at the beginning. One of the chapters in my new book
is devoted to a historical, analytical typology of public spheres. The very historical first
type of public sphere is a *crypto-public sphere*, as the public sphere at the beginning
was not a public in the true sense of the word. There were at the time only closed groups
of citizens, who actually were not citizens yet, and they had to hide themselves and were
not able to confront the government directly. At the stage of crypto-public sphere some
principles of the next stage's public sphere were developed, but in practice there were
no possibilities for those principles to be materialised before the bourgeois revolution.
The next step is the *proto-public sphere*, which was the liberal-bourgeois public sphere.
It was in a way open, but very limited to the middle class. Then there are those debates
about what happened with it, and what happened with the plebeian public sphere and so
on. That's a kind of "public sphere to develop". Then the development, in my perspecti-
ve, took the wrong direction. From this stage of proto-public sphere the straightforward
development would be, in theory, towards what I call the *ortho-public sphere,* and such
a public sphere would be very close to the ideal, the normative concept of the public sphe-
re. In practice, however, what happened was that the ideas related to the public sphere,
and to publicness, were hybridised. So we can now speak of a *hybrid* or *pseudo-public
sphere*, which is a commercialised version of the public sphere. The best indicator of this
tendency is that you can find some authors who discuss, or actually claim, that there is no
difference between the concept of the audience and the public. This is exactly what a pseu-
do-public sphere is, that there is no difference between the audience and the public.

**Within the literature concerning the Internet, especially the early literature, there
were a lot of ideas about the ways in which the Internet might help to restore com-
munities, publics and the public sphere. What do you think of that in this context?**
Similar ideas were very popular also with the rise of the radio in 1930's. For instance,
the famous idea by Bertold Brecht to change the radio into a means of communication,
to transform it from a means of distribution to a means of communication and … Yeah,
I certainly think that the Internet could be a very useful democratic tool. I always remem-
ber, however, a great sentence by Raymond Williams, who wrote that all technological
innovations in communication were in one way or the other always also misused, and
that's the problem. As I said before, it's not that kind of a deterministic view, that techno-
logy would determine forms of social lives. There are all kinds of mediating social factors
which make a technology misused, and that basically is the problem.

Speaking of your new book again. How does it relate to your previous work?
It's basically in the same direction. Before the interview we talked about this strange idea
that you are supposed to publish four articles every year, as a scholar, and if you look
at the references, you can hardly find references to works published fifty or a hundred
years ago. What I'm really trying to do, is to bring these ideas from the late 19th or early

20th century back into the field. Most of my writing is actually about these big men, with great ideas, which are now almost totally forgotten. One of the key questions for me, concerning this literature, is of course: Why did the notion of the public disappear? Why is it considered irrelevant? The public has disappeared.

Referring to your previous work on, for instance, public opinion. Isn't that what's happened to the notion of public, that it has become public opinion?
Yes, exactly. With the invention of polling, the idea of public disappeared, or started to disappear, and the reason was that everybody was interested in the results of public opinion polls and not theoretical discussions. If you look into the history, the late 19th century, the early 20th century, there were quite a large number of books dealing with the public and public opinion. After the invention of polling, the interest in the public declined. Besides, public opinion became generally related to propaganda between the 1930s and the 1950s, which is an indication of hybridisation I talked about earlier. A series of books were published in the United States with basically the same title – like 'Public Opinion and Propaganda', 'Propaganda and Public Opinion' Thus public opinion was not related to the public anymore, instead it was related to something which is quite the opposite of the public – propaganda.

Opinion polls have been subject to quite severe academic criticism lately, in terms of both theory and methodology. Still, they seem to play an increasingly important role in society. What's your view of that?
One thing to say about it is simply that polls are institutionalised in politics. You can hardly imagine a democratic political system without polls. Theoretically I'm inclined to agree with Benjamin Ginsberg, who said that polling actually pacifies public opinion (Ginsberg 1986). This basically means that those social groups with members who are able to communicate with each other quite regularly, were much more influential in the formation of public opinion before the invention of polls, for instance the working class. There are other authors, John Dryzek, for instance, who argue that polls are actually legitimizing the kind of political system that systematically privileges certain groups. Polling is very interesting and it raises a number of issues. Some authors have also argued that public opinion did not exist before polling. It's good to be faced with such ideas, to actually see the large scope of problems which are related to such a trivial procedure as opinion polls, which basically is a series of questions administered among a selection of anonymous individuals, and then their answers are statistically tabulated and published. There was recently a case in Slovenia, when the leader of one political party actually accused a polling company of having fabricated public opinion rather than measured it. This polling company went to court, they thought it was libel, and they won the case. The politician had to apologise, but he was in fact right (laughter). In a recent survey on the relationship between politicians and journalists, we tested third person effect on the question of the influence of public opinion poll's results. I've never ever seen such huge differences before, between the perceptions of how specific content influences the person interviewed and perceptions of its influence on a "third person". Politicians and journalists, they all believed, with almost no – only one percent – exception that polls have no influence on their own opinions, but huge influence on citizens' opinions. So politicians do actually believe that the media set the political agenda, not the political institutions anymore. Polling is certainly one tool to generate this political agenda.

Moving back to an issue that we've touched upon, publics and the extent to which they can become international. We've recently seen occasions when there's something at least similar to an international public, for instance, the anti-war demonstrations in 2003 that took place all over the world. What's your view on the potential of these publics to arise more often?

Yes, the concluding part of my book is exactly related to this issue. I'm suggesting that the phrase: "Think globally, act locally" is absolutely passé. What is needed is actually: "Think and act globally and locally at the same time". This is what is missing – communicative action should become transnational, or global. It's not enough to just think about problems; this is the characteristic of an audience, whose members are thinking about the same things. But what is actually constituting a public is communicative action. One of the problems related to this global action is the question of language. However, I think this is a minor problem compared to other problems. In fact, English is becoming the second mother tongue almost all over the developed world and elsewhere. We also see how various translating tools are getting available on the Internet and becoming more and more powerful. So, I don't really think that language is the main problem.

The problem is instead what we can refer to as common consciousness. Europe is a good case to illustrate this problem. In most of the EU countries, or all of them actually, the issue of the European Union is basically the issue of how 'my country' can profit from being a member of the European Union. I always remember a good friend of mine from the United Kingdom, who said: "You know why UK is a member of the European Union? To make sure that this idea will never succeed." So basically it's still national interests in the first place, and then – far away – something related to transnational communalities. And that's the biggest problem. The broader social problems are not considered really important if they don't affect us here, my country, directly. For example, not even environmental problems. … If we are not affected directly by pollution and natural disasters such as floods, most people do not care much about that. The problem is how to raise this transnational consciousness, that's fundamental to the existence of a transnational public sphere.

The recent financial crisis is an interesting case in this context. There we had this potential for a transnational, or a global public to arise against these extravagances of neo-liberal capitalism. But it does not seem to really...

Well, at the beginning of last year it looked like something would come out of it. There was the G7-summit in the UK, with the declaration the Prime Minister published after the meeting. At that time I thought at least something actually would happen, but then… There was obviously an effort to try to persuade citizens everywhere that this crisis is not as bad as it was expected, despite the fact that it was worse than expected. Look at the consequences now, and it's still getting worse. That's one thing. The other thing is that world leaders were not able to make it clear who was actually responsible for the crisis. Who did not act properly? How were governments, for instance, the Greek government, involved? And since they obviously were involved, they wanted to persuade people that this is something that's happened without any participation of any government whatsoever. And if no government participated, they also had to admit that other powerful actors actually were not responsible. I mean, if the US administration would declare some big financial corporations fundamentally responsible for what has happened, they could easily fight back and say: 'Well, but thank you, your assistance was very helpful. 'So it was, I think,

an obvious tendency to hide, not to make things transparent. This is an issue that critical scholars need to deal with much more. The citizens had no idea about who was actually responsible. How can you act if there is no one responsible? Actions of the public are addressed to those who have the power of decision making. If you don't know whose decision it was, it is very difficult to act.

So, the prospects for a transnational public seem quite weak.
Of course, this is not something that can be solved in a couple of years, or decades. It's a question of generations. It's also a question of education, I mean institutional education. It should also be a question for the media, but as long as the media are organised as business companies, it's hard to imagine that they would try to start a discussion which actually would not increase the attention paid to their newspaper or broadcast program. One important issue, which I think will need to be discussed seriously again, is the question of public service media, and that's also related to the Internet. This issue became very important already 120 years ago. With the commercialisation of the press in late 19th century, there were a number of ideas in different countries about how to transform the business of newspaper publishing. In practice, however, nothing happened at that time, of course, as the press was already privatised and the owners became too powerful. … There was some success with the radio, which was, as you know… the BBC was first organised as a business company, for three years, and then people were smart enough to realise that this was not too good, and they changed it into a public service. Public service media are actually the most tangible, something you can really point a finger at: 'This is a manifestation of publicness'. It's very difficult to do that with the public, or with the public sphere, but with public service media you can do that. So it would be extremely important to improve the public service system somehow, reorganise it, rearrange the field. The Internet is a really great opportunity [to start doing that], but I'm afraid that it will remain a missed opportunity. I think that what the European Commission is doing within this field nowadays is hopeless. It is absolutely favouring business, trying to limit the privileges of public services, and it doesn't want to interfere with media concentration and convergence. It basically follows the position of newspaper publishers. So in the field of the media I would say that the European Commission is very inactive, and that's somehow also related to the attitudes it expresses about the European public sphere. There are several documents which tackle this issue by basically saying that the only problem having to do with the European public sphere, as it's seen from the European Commission's point of view, is how to make European Commission more attractive in the eyes of European citizens.

Are there any additional issues, or fields, that you think we should talk about that we have not touched upon?
Well, we actually didn't talk that much about media …

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