

The Global Public: Its Power and its Limits

Conference to be held at the German Historical Institute London, 22-24 October 2015

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The conference will explore theories and practices of a global public in the long twentieth century. Recent forms of mass protest and debates around open, censored or intercepted flows of information have triggered debates about the power and limits of the global public. Yet many preconditions for such a global public had their origin in the last decades of the nineteenth century, when global travel became more standardised and new media such as telegraphy, mass print and later film entered the scene. During the two world wars, the global public was mobilized and manipulated in an unprecedented manner. Communication theorists and internationalists of the inter-war period, such as John Dewey, Harold Lasswell and H.G. Wells, saw it as a rising political force that would change future decision-making. In war or crisis, peace activists and humanitarians evoked it as a moral tribunal and normative entity. The organisers of cultural and sporting events hoped for new worldwide audiences, which businessmen and advertisers associated with opportunities for profit-making on a new scale. Politicians recognised the global public as a force for prestige and image cultivation, for instance during the Cold War, turning it into an arena of intense competition. At the same time the related technologies, especially print media and film, and their penetration of different world regions and layers of society provided a field of experimentation, and the limits of the global public, on a geographical and social but also on a normative scale, remained visible.

For the purpose of this conference, four areas seem particularly relevant:

(1) *Infrastructures of the global public.* New conceptions of a global public depended on new technologies, which were global but not worldwide in reach and often entered into competition with each other. Which media and technologies emerged as particularly promising? What were the educational preconditions for being part of the global public? Who were the actors promoting or driving the expansion of a global public, in technological, social and geographical terms? And who in turn benefitted from the remoteness of certain areas and groups?

(2) *Scope of the global public.* The production, penetration and limits of a global public, its geographical breadth and social depth await closer study. Notions such as world stardom, world fame or world records refer to the potentially global reach of cultural and sporting events and to a shared yardstick for measuring success in a global arena. Institutions like the Nobel Prize, first awarded in 1901, point to similar phenomena in the fields of science and literature. Who made it onto the global stage and who was instrumental in facilitating such staging? What were the centres and peripheries of this diffusion?

(3) *Economics of the global public.* The new global public was attached to tangible business interests, often in connection with the global rise of advertising and publicity. In this context, the question of media monopolies will be of particular relevance. This theme will investigate new commercial and marketing strategies and analyse who paid for, and who profited from, the new arenas of worldwide entertainment.

(4) *Politics of the global public.* The cultural and commercial mobilisation of audiences often had political aims and agendas, which took the form of competing claims over the public outside the nation-state. The political function of a global public thus merits closer investigation. What made a world event deserve global attention? When did information fail to reach the global public and why? Who invoked and who ignored the global public?

These questions have not yet been studied in a common framework, although they connect with several existing or emerging fields of research concerned with terms such as global consciousness, public opinion, propaganda, public sphere, civil society, mass audience, or world population. They also relate to studies of internationalism, which so far have often centred on the elite circles of Geneva, Paris and New York, with more recent additions on different internationalisms beyond its liberal version, for example in the socialist world. Cultural histories of the Cold War show how the global public could become a field of rivalry. It is also important to highlight other rifts such as the knowledge gap or the digital divide, as studies on a 'global civil society' and other approaches stressing connections can at times be overly optimistic.

Contributions to the conference could come from a wide range of topics, covering the long twentieth century from the 1870s onwards. We are particularly looking for empirical case studies covering different regions in the fields of history or related disciplines such as anthropology or geography. They could address the following modes of actions:

- *Conceptualising:* How did intellectuals, social scientists, or policy advisors envision the global public?
- *Informing:* Who reached the public and through which media (radio, cinema, television or print)? What were its languages?
- *Misinforming:* How was the global public manipulated, engineered, or captured? Who was disconnected from it and what information was withheld or censored?
- *Entertaining:* Who reached the global stage in the fields of culture, entertainment and sport? Who used entertainment and cultural missions to brush up their image? When was cultural consumption employed to appease the global public?
- *Competing:* Were there different publics and counterpublics with a global claim, for instance, Soviet and American? What were the hierarchies in the global public and how did they play out in the competition for radio listeners or Nobel Prize winners, for example? Who saw the global public as big business and was able to monopolize it?
- *Monitoring:* How was the global public measured, controlled and censored and through which institutions? Who had the power to steer the global public and when did it become an actor in its own right?
- *Localising:* What were the physical spaces of the global public such as public squares as sites of demonstrations? How did different publics and counterpublics interconnect or fragment?

The conference will take place on 22-24 October 2015 at the German Historical Institute London. Travel and accommodation expenses will be covered.

If you are interested in presenting a paper, please send proposals (including your name, institutional affiliation or place of residence and title of paper; abstract no longer than 500 words) and a brief CV to the conveners at the following address by 28 February 2015: huber@ghil.ac.uk