MA MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

**Airtime: The Public Sphere, the Public Screen, and AIDS Activism in
Contemporary North America**

Sheila Koenig

Jennifer Burwell

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Introduction:

Through a complex web of technological innovations, social and political changes, and market forces over the last century, we have witnessed vast changes in the arrangement and environments of public and private space. Douglas Kellner observes that "a media culture has emerged in which images, sounds, and spectacles help produce the fabric of everyday life, dominating leisure time, shaping political views and social behavior, and providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities" (*Media Culture*, 1). The introduction of visual media such as television and personal computers, as well as the popularization of the internet over the last two decades, has brought about major shifts in our conception of the public sphere. Most notable is the transformation, outlined by Jürgen Habermas, from the bourgeois public sphere to a public sphere marked and shaped by mass media and spectacle. Ideally, Habermas' bourgeois public sphere is structured as a social space in which private citizens may assemble to discuss, debate, and come to consensus in order to mediate between the state and civil society. According to Habermas, however, this ideal has been brought to its demise largely because of the influence of the mass media. Habermas' ideal public sphere rests on notions of consensus brought about by rational debate which has been replaced by consumption and uncritical reception. He concludes that the "world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only" (*Structural Transformation* 171).

In response to Habermas, I argue that the public sphere mediated through such screens as the television and the computer/internet, as well as through magazines and newspapers which, as I will explore further, have come to resemble screen media, is not

merely a simulation of a public sphere. Rather, it is a complex rearticulation of the public sphere as it has transformed both in response to and in conjunction with changes in social life, public and private space, and technology over the past century or so. While I agree with Habermas' claim that the mass media tend to construct the public sphere toward desired readings, and thus do not support the free and open debate central to Habermas' ideal bourgeois public sphere, I nonetheless contend that the arena for debate has not dissolved but rather has transformed.

Screens such as televisions, the internet, and newspapers bring public events into formerly private spaces, albeit in structured formats suited to benefit the interests of the owners and controllers of the media as well as corporate advertisers placing their products alongside marketable packages of infotainment coverage. In direct challenge to Habermas' contention that mass media foster an environment of commodity exchange that tends to transform the rational audience into uncritically receptive consumers, I argue that individuals within media audiences communicate with one another as a public, calling states and corporations to account for their public influence. Furthermore, I contend that publics have indeed come together in complex ways to engage critically with the material with which they are presented via televised coverage, newspaper front pages, or internet sources. I argue that private individuals participating in an audience of a given public event may constitute a public body, even if not a body assembled in a particular shared social space. This is not to say that an audience of a given image event necessarily constitutes a critical public, in and of itself, by mere virtue of the fact that audience members witness the same messages simultaneously. Rather, I am arguing that from this shared audience there may and indeed do arise various publics consisting of

private individuals discussing and debating readings of messages they have received across such screens.

In order to demonstrate my argument, I will outline some of the ways that activists have responded collectively to image events mediated through the screen formats of television, newspapers, and the internet, critically engaging with, challenging, and at times using the very media screens across which image events are initially presented to the audience. Although I will draw examples from a variety of activist movements over the past three decades, I will focus especially on AIDS activism because the crisis of AIDS, although it has a short history, has undergone vast transformations in both the way it has been treated by the media throughout the past few decades, and in how activists have responded in turn to state responses and public mediation of the crisis.

Habermas recognizes that his ideal liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere was never achieved; although he suggests that with some modification it could be realized today, he does not put forth in any detail what alterations must be made. Feminist critic Nancy Fraser argues that Habermas fails to interrogate various “dubious assumptions that underlie the liberal model”¹, and that, therefore, “we are left at the end of *Structural Transformation* without a conception [of the public sphere] that is sufficiently distinct from the liberal model to serve the needs of critical theory today” (“Rethinking” 71). It is not sufficient to conceptualize the public sphere only in terms of

¹ Fraser critiques in particular four assumptions made by Habermas: that social inequalities can be bracketed within a public; that the fragmentation of a public into many publics along lines of subgroup interests is an undesirable formation within a public sphere; that “private interests” should be excluded from the public sphere in favour of debate over the “common good”; and that the state can be strictly delineated from civil society. Instead, she argues that a multiplicity of competing “strong” and “weak” publics will better be able to bring a variety of issues to the forefront of public discussion, promoting participatory parity and “expanding our capacity to envision democratic possibilities beyond the limits of actually existing democracy” (“Rethinking” 92).

the liberal model he outlines; such a line of thinking ignores new forms of social organization and technological change which call for new modes of perception and new ways of negotiating the public sphere. Nor is it acceptable to discard the notion of the public sphere as a critical concept in social theory. Instead, we must rethink the public sphere in terms of current trends in social organization and communication practices. We need to consider the potential for publics to form and to debate through communication outside the face-to-face embodied voice idealized in Habermas' bourgeois public sphere, and take into account the uses of image and mass media communication in current public discussion. Furthermore we need to question the idea of consensus as the ideal result of public sphere debate, and to consider whether dissent and strategic alliance may also be a viable outcome in keeping in check the relationship between states, corporations, and civil society.

In order to conceptualize a public sphere in a way that better meets the needs of contemporary critical theory, I will attempt here to map out some of the ways that activist publics have come together and incorporated screen media in their attempts to enter into public discussion in a social context dominated by images and image events in the public sphere. I will begin by defining the term "screen" as I intend to use it as a central concept to my argument. I will then briefly summarize Habermas' conception of the public sphere, and point to some of the inadequacies of his model. I will focus in particular on his dismissal of mass media as a potential arena for public discussion, and point to some of the possibilities presented by a conception of a public sphere that includes screen media. I will then look at some of the obstacles and limitations to public participation presented by screen media. Finally, I will point to different activist publics that have used screen media

to further their attempts to gain entry into public debate, focusing on how traditional tactics of performative and artistic activism take on a new direction in the context of the public screen, and exploring some of the ways that activist publics are beginning to attempt to combat the limitations of a hypermediated public.

Remediation, Hypermediacy, and the Screen

Before I begin to outline the transformations that the media screen has brought to the public sphere, I will discuss the use of the term “screen” as I use it in this paper, and explain my reasoning for employing the term. By “screen” I am primarily referring to television and the internet, but also I am including the front pages of newspapers and, to a lesser degree, magazines. There are a few reasons for this inclusion that warrant elaboration here. A first and crucial concept in my discussion of the screen is the notion of remediation. Remediation is suggested by Marshall McLuhan's observation that "the 'content' of any medium is always another medium" (*Understanding* 23). Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin refer to remediation as “the representation of one medium in another” (45). Online versions of daily print newspapers provide an easy example of remediation. An online newspaper's homepage serves as the front page, with headlines which can be clicked to find the full-length articles “inside” the “paper”. It seems logical enough that newer media would borrow from the old; Marshal McLuhan noted with some disdain that “official culture is striving to force the new media to do the work of the old” (*Medium* 94). However, remediation does not only take place in a strictly forward progression. Bolter and Grusin point out that remediation is not a linear process; not only are older media, such as newspapers, represented in the newer, such as the internet, but in

turn "older media can also remediate newer ones" (55). In Toronto, for example, newspapers like *Metro* and *24 Hours*, with front pages that feature large photos and minimal text, remediate both television and the Windows layout of computer screens. Not only do the image-laden layouts of such newspapers reflect these other media, but so does the actual presentation of the news in short, digested pieces that resemble the fast-paced snippets of news presented in television newscasts. Thus, even print media such as newspapers and magazines can mimic electronic and digital media, making them screen-like.

A second concept important to my discussion of the screen is the notion of hypermediacy. According to Bolter and Grusin, "hypermediacy expresses itself as multiplicity... The logic of hypermediacy acknowledges multiple acts of representation and makes them visible" (33). Hypermediacy is intimately linked to remediation; remediations among multiple media provide an abundance of simultaneous representations of the world. Bolter and Grusin argue that

contemporary hypermediacy offers a heterogeneous space, in which representation is conceived of not as a window on to the world, but rather as 'windowed' itself—with windows that open on to other representations or other media. The logic of hypermediacy multiplies the signs of mediation and in this way tries to reproduce the rich sensorium of human experience. (33-34)

The myriad of media available in public and private space provide a multitude of representations of public life. Yet, while the range of different media expands, dominating public life with hypermediated representations, the process of remediation inherent to hypermediacy simultaneously reduces the distinctions between different media.

In the case of news media, I suspect that market forces play a large role in the remediation of the new media within the old. In order to compete with the rapidly available and highly visual information of television newscasts and internet sites, print media such as newspapers and magazines have had to incorporate some of the characteristics of these more recent media. Most major newspapers run much shorter articles than in the past, and photographs as well as sundry other images provide print media with a more visual component than written text alone. I will explore further the influence of the market economy and the commodity on the screen and the public sphere later in this paper, but for now I want to point to the ways that both the multitude of media dominating public life and the remediation of highly visual screen media within print media reveal a shift toward the image and spectacle even among media more associated with “reading” than with “looking”.

Because image-laden media are so ubiquitous in public space, the implications of hypermediacy for the public sphere are immense. W.J.T. Mitchell argues that “the difference between a culture of reading and a culture of spectatorship... is not only a formal issue; it has implications for the very forms that sociability and subjectivity take, for the kinds of individuals and institutions formed by a culture” (3). The bombardment of public space with images and media spectacle affects the way that individuals interpret and understand the world around them. Media theorist Ian Angus argues that communication media “constitute primal scenes, a complex of which defines the culture of a given place and time, an Epoch of Being” (190). According to Angus, the relationship between media and culture is mutually constructive. That is, media both produce culture and act as the “primal scene” upon which culture is produced and

meaning is made. The interaction of a multitude of media in a hypermediated public opens up spaces from which epistemologies emerge. Being is itself defined and grounded in media representation.

Along similar arguments, Jean Baudrillard argues that the reality of the media screen is even more real than the “real”. In “The Ecstasy of Communication”, Baudrillard writes, “today the scene and mirror no longer exist; instead, there is a screen and network” (126). With the propulsion of the home into space via lunar module and the invasion of the domestic scene with television screen, the distinction between interior and exterior, public and private, has been obliterated, rendering the world depthless and giving way to the “smooth, operational surface of communication” (127). According to Baudrillard, *le plus petit écart possible*, or the smallest possible space, between the real and the imagined has disappeared, and with it the distinction between public and private, self and other, scene and mirror, theory and fiction. Thus the world is a flat surface which conceals nothing; because this referential distance has been eliminated, “our own body and the whole surrounding universe become a control screen” (127). This liquidation of meaning comes from

an irreversible tendency toward three things: an ever greater formal and operational abstraction of elements and functions and their homogenization in a single virtual process of functionalization; the displacement of bodily movements and efforts into electric or electronic commands, and the miniaturization, in time and space, of processes whose real scene is that of infinitesimal memory and the screen with which they are equipped. (128-9)

Baudrillard posits that the message of exchange value so valorized in the commodity form has given way to a pure circulation of signs without referent (131). Thus, in his theory, the material processes of production and consumption disappear, and in their

place emerge the system, operation, control, instantaneous miniaturized exchange of information in the obscene ecstasy of communication.

Angus and Baudrillard have both been criticized for their arguments. Angus tends to utilize an impenetrable prose that makes unclear and as a result somewhat unpersuasive his argument that the interaction of communication media constitutes the primal scene that establishes social reality (Di Norcia, 96). Baudrillard, similarly, has been criticized for abstracting from the material exchanges behind the circulation of information to the point of fetishism, as well as for providing a fatalistic, over-determining account of technology in culture that lends itself to political nihilism (Sconce, 167-209; Vine, 36-44). However, their arguments point to some important considerations in terms of understanding the relationship of screen media to social reality and public life. First, while it may be debatable whether social reality is produced by media, there is no doubt that in a techno-industrial culture such as North America, social reality and public life are shaped within the context of a multitude of increasingly visual media. Second, the immediacy and spectacularity of screen media entail a loss of depth to the information represented on the media screen, which, as I will discuss in more detail later, has serious implications for way that individuals engage with a mediated public sphere.

Furthermore, Baudrillard's theory in particular points to the transformation of how we conceive of public space itself. As Baudrillard argues, screen media such as television and the internet have the dual capacity to bring private space to the public eye as well as to bring public events into the private home. There is both a flattening and an expansion of the notion of public space as an arena in which public debate may take place. The screen, then, represents the flat interface of the public sphere as it is reflected

through the media. Newspapers, in particular the front pages of newspapers, act also in the capacity of the screen inasmuch as the newspaper remediates the televisual screen and represents the public sphere in a similar way, i.e. reflecting information through image and small snippets or headlines of information without the deeper exploration provided by traditional printed text. Again, the concept of remediation is key to understanding the importance of the screen to the transformation of the public sphere. As Kevin Michael DeLuca and Jennifer Peebles argue, “remediation provides a frame for conceptualizing the relation between the public sphere and the public screen. The latter neither simply succeeds the former nor are they utterly distinct arenas” (133). As I will discuss in the following section, the public screen is not a replacement for, but a crucial supplement to the public sphere as it plays out in contemporary North America.

Rethinking Mass Media and the Public Sphere

Habermas outlines the ideal public sphere as a space in which the power of the state is criticized through rational public discussion directed toward reaching consensus. The public sphere thus stands in opposition to the state, emerging as “a forum in which the private people, come together to form a public, readied themselves to compel public authority to legitimate itself before public opinion” (*Structural Transformation* 25-6).

Unlike either private business transactions or exchanges constrained by legal regulations or state bureaucracy, the interactions taking place within the public sphere are unrestricted, carried out between private individuals “with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions—about matters of general interest” (“The Public Sphere” 102). Access to the public sphere is

open to all citizens; however, social inequalities are to be bracketed in favour of a “common interest” as determined through rational debate.

According to Habermas, the conditions which made the public sphere possible developed specifically in eighteenth century Europe, with the erosion of feudalism and the emergence of polarized spheres of public authority on the one hand, and private autonomy on the other. Where once identity and “public” concern had been dictated by tradition and divine law in a fixed and determined hierarchy, now these concerns were splintered between private and public organizations, and a new relationship to the emerging market economy. In the context of this developing market economy, the ownership of property was no longer under the control of ruling heads of state or feudal lords, but rested instead in the hands of private persons operating within a household economy. By the end of the century the market economy had begun to grow beyond the limits of the private realm, and thus gained public relevance. Consolidated state power in the form of parliament, militaries, administration, governing bodies, state-controlled press and legal institutions now stood in opposition to a society of private individuals subject to its rule. The space between the poles required a new interface; the public sphere emerged as a social space in which to deal with private concerns which were taking on an increasingly public significance.

Habermas argues that, due to a number of constraining factors, some of which arose out of the very conditions from which the public sphere was made possible, the ideal liberal public sphere never reached its full potential. First, the press, which had been according to Habermas “a mediator and intensifier of public discussion” (“The Public Sphere” 105), became more infused with private interests with the rise of bourgeois

constitutional states, thus taking on a more commercial role. Second, access to the public sphere opened up beyond the strata of the bourgeois, leading to the splintering of the public into social groups. Replacing the rational debate among private individuals toward forming a public opinion that would comprise a consensus concerning the common good, there was a competition of special interest groups. With the rise of the social welfare state, according to Habermas, the state became intertwined with social powers in such a way as to allow each a certain amount of authority in the realm of the other, which Habermas argues leads to a “‘refeudalization’ of the public sphere” (106), whereby public opinion is manipulated and shaped by public relations and mass media displays instead of being reached through critical rational debate. The result of a mass mediated public display, he argues, is a “public sphere in appearance only” (*Structural Transformation* 171), an illusion sold to “the great mass of consumers whose receptiveness is public but uncritical” (175).

There are a number of flaws in Habermas’ conception of the public sphere, and indeed his conception of the public sphere has received much criticism. One contentious point warranting discussion is his outright rejection of the mass media as a potential site of publicity in the critical sense. Habermas contends that the contemporary public sphere has seen a shift “from a public critically reflecting on its culture to one that merely consumes it”, and that “the ‘culture’ propagated by the mass media is a culture of integration” in which “the public sphere assumes advertising functions” (175) for the status quo. He asserts that the authority of commodity exchange has become the ruling condition for the mass media, rendering the public sphere an illusory construct manufactured and sold by the mass media. He argues furthermore that consumers of mass

media are uncritically receptive; he maintains that the disintegration of the public sphere as a critical space is exacerbated by the manipulation and manufacture of the mass-mediated public sphere: “the more [the public sphere] can be deployed as a vehicle for political and economic propaganda, the more it becomes unpolitical as a whole and pseudo-privatized” (175).

Certainly the pervasiveness of screen media poses an impediment to open debate concerning public opinion. The medium of the public forum is remediated through the screen. As I have already discussed, different screen media remediate one another, so that newspapers come to resemble television, and magazines to resemble the pop-up window format of the internet, creating a hypermediated representation of the public forum which neither exists separately from nor entirely replaces the “original” form. Audiences are presented with a simulated public sphere which is, however, entirely constructed through production and editing, thus precluding the free debate and dialogue which Habermas idealizes. Since most of the content reaching these screens is owned and controlled by corporate interests and states, the very structure of the media is developed toward benefiting these interests, directed toward eliciting desired readings from the audience. Because there is little opportunity for immediate audience response, and often the available channels for response are also controlled by the owners of such media, the freedom of the private individual to engage critically in the screen mediated public sphere is impaired.

However, the intended messages put forth by owners of media production are not, of course, the only readings that audiences may form. In his landmark work, “Encoding/Decoding”, Stuart Hall outlines three different ways that audiences create

meaning from the codes and signs communicated through television. The “dominant or preferred meanings” (134) are constituted by the messages the broadcaster intends, using discursive domains that have imbedded in them patterns and codes of the prevailing social order. Audiences who are “operating within the dominant code”, or who read and understand the preferred meaning as it is intended by the broadcaster, according to Hall, occupy “the dominant-hegemonic position” (136). In addition to the dominant hegemonic position, audiences may occupy a “negotiated code or position”, which “contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements” (137). Audiences negotiate meaning through both an understanding and partial acceptance of the codes of the dominant social order and through resistance based on situational or local knowledge. The third position that Hall outlines is that occupied by those operating within an “oppositional code”, wherein the audience “detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference” (138). Although those in control of the means of media production use codes and structures so embedded in the dominant social order that these structures are themselves institutionalized, audiences are able to interpret readings of the mediated text that do not necessarily correspond to the messages that broadcasters intend to spread.

Individual readings of screen mediated messages, whether these readings are oppositional or not, do not in and of themselves constitute a public. However, from the widespread audiences of screen media, publics arise and come together. Individuals who discuss and debate their readings of screen media with one another and, in more structured ways, with the purveyors of said media, in effect form a public. As I will explore in further detail later on, the formation of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash

Power) in response to the U.S. government's inaction in the face of the growing AIDS crisis and to misrepresentations of the crisis in mainstream media is a demonstration of such a public forming. There are some important differences between this kind of a public and that envisioned by Habermas. Drawn from audiences of mass media, emergent publics reveal a widespread and diverse constituency. Media such as the internet make possible a shared audience hailing from vastly different places, often countries and even continents apart. Members of an emergent public reflect different classes, races, genders, sexual identities, and ethnicities, and thus challenge the universality idealized by Habermas. The way that these publics gather together is also different, in the sense that the "coming together" is not necessarily a physical act, although propinquity is not precluded, either. Embodied conversation is not guaranteed, nor is it necessary. The very forms of communication used by these publics have transformed. Along with face-to-face conversation and debate in the physical space of a public forum, emergent publics may communicate with one another in virtual public space, via the internet. Furthermore, as I will discuss in a later section, the goals of a given public arising from a mass media audience may differ from the ideal of consensus put forth by Habermas.

Publics emerging from audiences of mass media do not reflect the universal homogeneity of Habermas' model of the public sphere. In fact, they more closely resemble what Nancy Fraser refers to as "subaltern counterpublics" ("Rethinking" 81). Fraser questions Habermas' contention that the splintering of a public into many publics is detrimental to the democratic utility of the public sphere. In contrast to Habermas' argument that the fragmentation of the public sphere into what he calls "interest groups"

signals the decline of the democratic potential of the bourgeois public sphere, Fraser asserts that “arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promote the idea of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public” (81). These subaltern counterpublics provide spaces for expression among those who might be excluded, subtly or explicitly, from a more comprehensive public, while also holding the potential to communicate and overlap with other publics and counterpublics, creating an arena more, not less, likely to promote participatory equality.

Fraser also questions whether it is in fact possible, as Habermas argues, to bracket social inequalities within a public in order to carry on rational critical debate as though these inequalities do not exist. She suggests not, arguing that mere inclusion can mask more subtle power exchanges, and thus “social inequalities can infect deliberation, even in the absence of any formal exclusions” (78). Instead of a bracketing of social inequalities, then, she makes a case for the eradication of such inequalities within a given public sphere: “it is a necessary condition for participatory parity that systemic social inequalities be eliminated” (80). She contests Habermas’ argument that “private interests” should be excluded from the public sphere in favour of debate over the “common good”. Fraser points out that the delineation of private from public is not a natural or fixed boundary. Moreover, the exclusion of “private interests” may work to further subordinate groups marginalized in public discussion, by forcing their own self interest or group interests out of the sphere of public discussion.

It is particularly important in a social environment marked by the ubiquitous presence of the screen in public life to consider the multiplicity of counterpublics within

any given public. Private ownership of screen media such as television, magazines, newspapers, and much of the content on the internet curbs the opportunity for free debate and discussion relating to public opinion. In addition, the dispersal of audiences across physical space makes a singular cohesive public anachronistic. According to DeLuca and Peeples, the speed with which emerging communication technologies reach vast distances allows these technologies to “physically shrink the world while simultaneously mentally expanding it, producing a vast expansion of geographical consciousness”. They see Habermas’ conception of the public sphere as limited “because it holds static notions of the public arena, appropriate political activity, and democratic citizenship, thus ignoring current social and technological conditions” (131). The vast physical space reached by mass media combined with the virtual “shrinking” of distances between diverse publics create a social environment more conducive to communication between diverse counterpublics than to an overarching public.

An issue such as the crisis of AIDS, which has global proportions, affects different regions or even different communities within regions differently. Because media such as television and the internet can reach across the physical spaces between regions and communities, dialogue and debate over what is to be done in the face of such a crisis is possible across great distances. However, the kinds of solutions or actions sought by one community will differ from that of another, so the notion of consensus among one large public to encompass the needs of disparate communities is virtually unfathomable. It is more likely that different publics will arise out of different communities, dialoguing between one another to offer solutions and arguments, but offering distinct relationships with the issue in order to provide multiple ways to approach a shared problem.

Dissenting arguments outside the dominant subject position broadcast by media producers are less likely to reach an audience of comparable size to the audiences of said media, and are thus marginalized. Because mass media messages are likely to reflect the interests of media corporations who own the media, critical publics emerging from their audiences stand in opposition not only to the state, but to these corporations, as well. Emergent publics acknowledge that there are specific powers behind the messages of screen media, and activism is directed specifically toward these powers. In a discussion of the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle, DeLuca and Peeples point to the diversity of groups who had come together to contest the WTO, paying specific attention to the direct action protesters took against symbols of corporate power. DeLuca and Peeples assert that “activists recognize transnational corporations as the dominant powers of the new millennium” (125) and that activists recognize and react to the influence of corporations on mass media and on state policy. Furthermore, they argue that “activists recognize the TV screen as the contemporary shape of the public sphere and the image event designed for mass media dissemination as an important contemporary form of citizen participation” (126). Therefore, they argue, activists recognize that in order to counter a public discussion that is so shaped by the commodity form that, in the words of Habermas, “it loses its publicist function” (*Structural Transformation* 164), they must find ways to bring dissenting arguments to mass media screens such as television, the front pages of newspapers and the internet.

Mainstream screen media is undoubtedly a source of information pertinent to public opinion formation in North America. Audiences draw information not only from traditional news programs and sites, but also from other programs which mix

entertainment and politics. Citing a study conducted in 2000, Marshall Sella notes in an article in the *New York Times Magazine* that

47 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 often gleaned information about the presidential campaign from late-night comedy shows, like those of Jay Leno and David Letterman. And the late-nights' appeal is not limited to younglings; more than a quarter of all adults get campaign news from those programs. (74)

Without question the screen presents a powerful tool for the spreading of messages that influence public opinion. As Douglas Kellner argues, “new technologies are modes of information *and* entertainment that permeate work, education, play, social interaction, politics, and culture” (*Media Spectacle*, 13). Thus we cannot conceive of a public sphere that truly serves as an arena for public opinion formation without considering the role and potential uses of screen media in fostering and spreading discussion. A conception of the public sphere that takes technology seriously draws from and expands on Habermas’ conception of the public sphere in order to take into consideration the ways that “new technologies introduce new forms of social organization and new modes of perception” (DeLuca and Peeples, 131).

As early as the 1930s, critical theorists have recognized alongside the loss of certain modes of communication the potential for new ways to emerge of knowing ourselves and the world. According to Walter Benjamin, “the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence” (224). While Benjamin argues that in the decline of middle class society subjective contemplation of art has been replaced with distraction, he posits that distraction can potentially lead to “a heightened presence of mind” (240). He argues that “the ability to master certain tasks in a state of distraction proves that their solution has become a matter of habit. Distraction as

provided by art presents a covert control of the extent to which new tasks have become soluble by apperception” (242); thus, the distraction fostered by fragmented images of film can lead subjects to observe a field of action that reality does not offer in wholes, and this field of action opens up new ways of perceiving the world. In fact, Benjamin even suggests the possibility that technologies such as film serve to politicize art (226), which, he posits, is a resistant response to Fascism (244).

Mechanical reproduction, Benjamin argues, has its social roots in “the desire of contemporary masses to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction” (223). His observation can also be applied even more strongly to contemporary television and digital media. The immediacy and abundance of information that is available to contemporary publics creates a context in which audiences must be able to interact with multiple messages simultaneously. The fast pace with which publics are presented information and the prevalence of the image in screen media provide little time for contemplation. The public sphere in the age of techno-industrial culture is a forum for a public in a state of hyper-distraction.

The public sphere as mediated through screen media is only partial. It is neither the “new public sphere”, nor is it the signal of the end of the public sphere as a critical tool for keeping states and corporations in check. Rather, it is a “necessary supplement” to the public sphere that Habermas first mapped (DeLuca and Peebles, 127). It works in conjunction with more traditional forums for discussion, such as academic and journalistic writing, lobbying and face-to-face discussion. In order to compete with the images put forth by purveyors of dominant screen media, diverse counterpublics have

begun to find ways to create and distribute oppositional messages. Using multiple tactics, including performed image events, countermedia productions, subversion of existing media genres, and artistic displays, activist counterpublics are finding ways to use images in subversive ways, and to garner the attention of the media in such a way as to bring competing messages to a screen-mediated public sphere. Screen media, with its many limitations, can also be a scene of public discussion that fosters further debate.

Habermas is not entirely incorrect to argue that the public sphere as it plays out in the mass media takes on “advertising functions”; however, the messages and images put forth by the corporate powers and states that produce these media are not necessarily the only messages that reach the screen. Advertising methods, along with a variety of highly visible approaches to activism, are also used to garner media attention for dissenting arguments, helping to provide the context from which oppositional readings can be drawn. Publics then can mobilize around these readings, fostering more in-depth discussion which can take place in the form of further interaction with the public screen or in more traditional forms, such as written commentary and face-to-face discussion. The public sphere as it plays out on the screen is not an ideal; rather it is a complementary addition to more traditional forums through which we can begin to understand and theorize the limits of, to borrow a term from Nancy Fraser, “actually existing late-capitalist democracy” (“Rethinking” 71).

Limitations of Actually Existing Democracy in a Techno-Industrial Culture

Because mainstream screen media have such an important influence on public opinion formation in North America, dissenting publics have recognized the need to

bring their messages to mass media screens in order to create spaces for oppositional readings. Claudia Orenstein argues that “in a culture of spectacle, the visible act of performance itself speaks louder than any merely didactic argument” (151). The fact that images presented across screen media are shaped by the corporate interests of those with the means of media production does not preclude the opportunity for critical response to issues of corporate/state hegemony and power inequity represented in these images, even using the very same screens to communicate that critical response. As DeLuca and Peebles outline, the very conventions of corporate owned media that limit and frame what is broadcast or distributed as news may also present opportunities for dissenting voices to reach mass audiences:

the need for media companies to be competitive and attract audiences opens up the public screen to stories beyond the narrow ideological interests of transnational capital. Further, although certain news conventions work against activist groups, others, most notably the emphasis on the new, drama, conflict, objectivity, and compelling visuals, open up the public screen. Finally, TV amplifies voices, enabling one person... or small groups to communicate to millions via the public screen. (139)

Corporate producers are subject to the very rules of consumption they uphold. However, these rules pose serious limitations to activism.

The transitory nature of recent protest efforts presents its problems, especially in the context of the increasing importance of screen-mediated image events and the highly centralized power of capital. Activist publics that rely on mainstream screen media to bring their arguments to a larger audience must also rely on their ability to maintain a spectacle on those screens long enough to be seen and considered by “the folks at home”. The extent to which any message can spread countering those of media producers and owners is also contingent on the reception of staged spectacles by those people who can

make meaning out of what they are seeing. In the context of a public sphere dominated by image events broadcast over the internet, on television, and in newspapers and magazines, “images... are important not because they represent reality but create it” (DeLuca and Peeples, 133). This becomes especially problematic when the media by which images of activism are spread are controlled to a great extent by powers against whom these actions are directed. Private ownership of media production is probably the largest obstacle facing activists who wish to counter the messages of the dominant social order with oppositional voices.

Corporate interests shape and mediate what information is distributed to audiences via screen media. Not only do the producers of screen media filter what counts as news, but they present it in an edited, packaged format that supports the ideology of consumerism upon which mainstream media is built. Even DeLuca and Peeples concede that “ownership [of mass media] often restricts content that is against the interests of the transnational corporations that own and advertise on the media” (136). The technology of the screen itself only allows for a particular frame of image to be viewed at once, so in order to capture a more complete view of what is taking place at a given event, the camera must take in footage much longer in duration than is typically broadcast in a given account of news. In the world of infotainment, where the rules of consumption and commodity shape the production of news, producers tend to favour more dramatic, entertaining footage, which may not necessarily represent the entire situation being presented. Thus a scuffle on the sidelines of a rally can be presented as a riotous crowd, or a broken Starbucks window as representative of the activities of the day (DeLuca and Peeples, 137-8). Divorced from the context of analysis backing their actions, activists in

Seattle (as well as in following protests) are presented as violent, anarchic vandals, or ACT UP activists as dangerous, angry homosexuals on the loose in civil, straight America. Furthermore, written or audio commentary accompanying corporate news media encourages audiences to comply with the dominant reading of the text rather than to form oppositional readings required to make a critical response to the information as it is presented.

Granted, audiences accustomed to the rapid flash of images in a predominantly visual culture are not cultural dupes, vulnerable to whatever image may be presented to them. Nonetheless, when presented with a momentary, spectacular glimpse of action, of which the more violent or extreme acts that catch the ratings are usually showcased over the long-winded speeches, the likelihood of misreadings or even dismissal of any counterhegemonic action is much greater than if such action is accompanied by explanatory analysis. Furthermore, most mainstream media producers operate within a “professional code” which, according to Stuart Hall, “is the position... which the professional broadcasters assume when encoding a message which has *already* been signified in a hegemonic manner” (136). The images of the violent anarchist or the monstrous homosexual are compelling precisely because they operate within already existing practices of signification, which makes them even more difficult to combat.

In fact, the very actions that may catch the eye of the public screen are often those that reinforce the stereotypes activists may hope to contest, not because the actions are necessarily exemplary of the stereotypes employed, but because they are reported in such a way as to support the stereotypes. The “violent” protests in Seattle demonstrate the way screen media can manipulate an image event to support preconceived notions of activists

involved. While the overwhelming majority of protesters in Seattle were non-violent demonstrators attempting to assemble in a celebration of resistance, the “festival of color was punctuated with black-clad anarchists and the nonviolent direct action was upstaged by images of smashed windows, burning trash bins, and brutal interactions with the police” (DeLuca and Peeples, 140). While activist communities are divided as to the acceptability of symbolically violent direct action (which refers to violent action carried out against property rather than other people), what is certainly evident is that the image of the activist as vandal is upheld by the media’s tendency to focus on the violent over the peaceful elements of protest.

DeLuca and Peeples see violence as a site of opportunity for activists to create “compelling images” to attract major media attention:

[t]he whole world did watch-not because thirty thousand protesters gathered in one location, but because uncivil disobedience and symbolically violent tactics effectively disrupted the WTO, shutdown Seattle, provoked police violence, and staged the images the media feed upon. An analysis of media coverage of the WTO protests reveals such tactics as necessary ingredients for compelling the whole world to watch. (142)

While their analysis points to the way that symbolic violence can work to attract media attention to resistance movements, they fail to address the ways that such activism itself may mask the real implications that such tactics have on people. Whether or not symbolic violence such as the smashing of a Starbucks window can be said to “give activists a bad name”, the actual acts of violence are more than merely symbolic when they threaten the people who work inside the coffee shop. As noted by global justice activist Colin Rajah,

We could see the staff, people of color, running toward the counter, really scared. I was in a group of young global justice activists of color, and we immediately found ourselves identifying with the people inside the store. And we realized that tactic was a mistake. (quoted in Fellner, 4)

One of the greatest risks of divorcing the theory of activism from the practice is distortion of the implications of activism as it exists behind the screen. Furthermore, in a social and political climate wherein the “visual bias of TV works against those deploying traditional, word-based forms of argument” (DeLuca and Peeples, 136), the prevalence of the image may even supercede the critical motivation for the action taken.

Privileging the image over the message has led some activists, in their attempts to take action and create spectacle, to come to this action with sparse bases of critique. Action is taken for action’s sake in what Liza Featherstone, Doug Henwood, and Christian Parenti refer to with disdain as “activism” (27), which they describe as “a brave new ideology [that] combines the political illiteracy of hypermediated American culture with all the moral zeal of a nineteenth-century temperance crusade” (26). What Featherstone, Henwood, and Parenti see in contemporary North American activism is an increase of “anti-intellectualism” (26) among activists who are more focused on creating visible, theatrical action than getting “bogged down in analysis” (25). Lack of analysis within activism seriously undermines the effectiveness of any action by “[reducing] strategy to mere tactics” (27). Without strategy, activism stirs little more than more activism, according to Featherstone, Henwood, and Parenti.

“Activism” is of particular concern to dissenting publics in the context of a screen-mediated public sphere, because, as I have argued, the fast pace of messages broadcast over screen media leaves little time for detailed articulation of dissenting arguments. Activism without a context of strategic analysis may indeed garner attention from the “eye” of the media, but to what end remains unclear. For example, such symbolic violence as I have mentioned above, divorced from an analysis of the kinds of

trade practices and corporate hegemony against which that violence is meant to protest, serves little more than to perpetuate violent action and in turn violent response from authorities such as, in that case, the police. Furthermore, without accompanying avenues for further discussion, spectacular activism, violent or not, does little to foster oppositional readings of what appears on the screen, which, as I have mentioned, leaves a great deal of power in the hands of corporate media producers to perpetuate their own desired meanings and stereotypes through the images that take place on the screen. The protests in Seattle in particular have left a lingering impression on the public imagination. The sheer immensity of the protests, along with the wide variety of groups converging to protest the same obstacle for different reasons, had not before been seen. The focus of the media on symbolic violence has left the public with a certain amount of fear regarding large protests such as those in Seattle and in following global justice gatherings. However, on a more positive note, the spontaneous alliance of such an enormous and diverse crowd has also revealed new possibilities for global justice activists, acting as a rallying point from which to mobilize.

When the focus of the action becomes the spectacle over the message, often times the message itself is lost. Queer Nation (QN), for example, drawing from the direct action tactics of ACT UP, used mainly short-term, media-oriented actions to garner attention for gltb issues. Storming the shopping malls and shocking Middle America into recognition of queers in social space, QN succeeded most significantly to “insert gay spectacle into the centers of straight consumption” (Hennessy, 52). However, divorced from the multilayered social relations of labour and consumption that create the commodity, this kind of action is limited to creating a recognition that queers can

participate in public desire. Thus it feeds into the commodity exchange by offering up a new and exotic product to be sold to a new gay consumer (66). Commodification of activist agitation feeds into hegemonic control of media images wherein we begin to see particular representations of otherness in mainstream media, but devoid of the radicalism that initially brings them to the screen. The QN slogan, “We’re here. We’re queer. Get used to it,” has become something of a cliché.

The commodification and depoliticization of radical otherness is not only a phenomenon of news media reporting on protest activity. Kellner points out that “the fusions of the immense infotainment conglomerates disclose a synergy between information technologies and multimedia, which combine entertainment and information, undermining the distinctions between these domains” (*Media Spectacle* 14). The representation of othered subjectivities in entertainment media such as movies, television sitcoms, and dramas also reflects the dominant position of media producers, perhaps in an even more insidious form than that of the news, because the representation can be defended or dismissed under the justification that it is not real, or is “just TV”. Cultural theorist Paula Treichler describes an apt example of the appropriation and neutralization of otherness by television in her discussion of the 1985 made-for-TV movie *An Early Frost*. The protagonist of the film, upon learning that he has AIDS, returns to his nuclear family for support, and the film essentially erases any indication of his ties to the gay community. According to Treichler, “*An Early Frost* demonstrates television’s tendency to dissolve the gayness of the gay person with AIDS into a homogenized and universalized person facing death”. While she concedes that such universalization can be

useful, she argues that it nonetheless “enables television both to dramatize death and to escapes a fate worse than death: showing gay people being gay” (134).

In the twenty years that have passed since *An Early Frost*, gay people being gay have begun to enter the screens of television and film. However, sometimes inclusion has come at great cost to counterhegemonic movements. A reality television program such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* demonstrates the way that televised portrayals of subcultures can be depoliticized and repackaged in a marketable form. The show features the “Fab Five” gay men who provide tips to straight men on how to “improve themselves” through fashion, grooming, table etiquette, and interior decorating. The use of the word “queer” in the title reflects the reclamation of what until the late twentieth century had been considered an offensive slur referring to gay and lesbian people. Reclamation of terms such as “queer” and “dyke” have stemmed from various radical human rights movements, including feminist, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender movements. The use of “queer” to reflect the empowerment of sexual minorities draws from a rejection of heteronormative definitions of sexuality and gender that uphold a binary model of gender (male and female, biologically determined) and deem heterosexuality as a normalized sexuality by which all others are deemed deviant. “Queer” is a highly political term, arising out of a number of highly political movements. However, its use in the title of this show is completely devoid of the political roots from which it has been derived in its contemporary use. The “Fab Five” not only represent some of the stereotypes that circulate around gay masculinity, i.e. that gay men are naturally better groomed, more aware of fashion, and make wonderful interior designers. In addition, their function in the program is to teach straight men, as well as audiences of

the show, how to live according to social norms that reflect the dominant-hegemonic position supported by media producers. Made palatable to the dominant public both by their impotence and by their reinforcement of stereotype, these images of otherness serve not only to tap into a newly recognized market, but also to quiet the voices that call out for visibility. The spectacle itself, while it may be effective to some extent in bringing activism to the public via screen media, also lends itself alarmingly well to commodification.

In addition to hegemonic manipulation and commodification of subaltern counterpublics, a last and formidable limitation to public debate in the context of the screen culture is lack of access. Many dissenting counterpublics just don't have the kinds of resources to afford widespread distribution of messages to compete with the wide reaches of mainstream media. Although in the last twenty years media such as video have become somewhat more affordable, and counterhegemonic websites have proliferated across the internet, they nonetheless remain within the sphere of access of those who have the means to produce and/or consume them. This means that the production of countermedia, as well as mainstream screen media, is largely concentrated in, and thus reflects most predominantly the values of, more affluent regions such as North America, Europe, and economically dominant areas of Asia. Representation of those who do not have access to the means of media production, whether it is corporate mainstream media or counterhegemonic alternative media, is limited to what producers of the media choose to include.

Also at stake is the ability to participate in resistant action. In order to take part and be represented in the kinds of mass demonstrations that garner attention from

mainstream media, one must have the leisure time and the ability to get to the location. Working class people, among whom the disproportionate majority are people of colour, face the risk of underrepresentation in movements that rely on the ability to actively show up at an event to attract the gaze of screen media. Referring to a number of demonstrations against American-led global capitalism, Kristine Wong notes that “at all of these events, protesters of color have been outnumbered by whites”. She thus argues that street activism that is directed by more affluent white people “[limits] the potential of such a movement if those most affected by globalization [are] underrepresented” (216). In addition, in response to such massive protests as were seen at the WTO meetings, corporations and states involved in such meetings have deliberately made subsequent meetings inaccessible, either through remote location or through physical structures barring entrance to protesting publics (DeLuca and Peeples, 142-143). Thus, although there may be potential for the screen to provide audiences a certain amount of access to the messages of dissent even if those audiences cannot physically be there, the ability of participants to provide the spectacle of resistance is limited by the organization of these meetings in ways that prevent public access.

Activism in the Hypermediated Public

The contemporary shape of public life in North America, dominated by screen media and market capitalism, presents a number of formidable constraints to the notion of public debate and dissent. Kellner notes that “arguably, we are now at a stage of the spectacle at which it dominates the mediascape, politics, and more and more domains of everyday life” (*Media Spectacle* 14). He argues that the result of escalating infotainment

spectacles through multiple media is “a spectacularization of politics, of culture, and of consciousness, as media multiply and new forms of culture colonize consciousness and everyday life, generating novel forms of struggle and resistance” (15). The kinds of resistance that have arisen in the current context of a hypermediated public sphere provide us some opportunities “to explore what is happening and what is possible under current conditions” (DeLuca and Peebles, 134).

As I have already argued, screen media are powerful tools in the formation of public opinion. In order to participate in public debate, activist publics have used a variety of ways to undertake the task of bringing dissenting arguments to the screen. One of the most commonly used tactics, drawn from more traditional modes of protest and alternative print media, has been to create countermedia, such as alternative magazines, films, videos, websites, pamphlets and newspapers. The effectiveness of such countermedia varies. In the case of AIDS activism, the stereotypes and cultural meanings surrounding the AIDS epidemic in North America have, according to Paula Treichler, “produced a parallel epidemic of meanings, definitions, and attributions”, making AIDS not strictly a medical epidemic, but also what she refers to as “an epidemic of signification” (1). In the mainstream media, multilayered meanings, embedded with codes of the dominant social order, are ascribed to the disease and to the people living with it. Partnered with a lack of accurate and detailed information on the crisis, these meanings have become institutionalized in North American public life, and are thus very difficult to disrupt.

Nonetheless, many groups have attempted to do so, using such countermedia as magazines, pamphlets, and videos to make their messages heard. In 1988, in response to a

dangerously misleading article published in *Cosmopolitan* magazine claiming that women who engage in “ordinary sexual intercourse” were not at significant risk of contracting HIV, a group of women involved with the New York chapter of ACT UP picketed the publishers’ offices, produced a video called *Doctors, Liars, and Women* about the action, and created a handbook of facts concerning women and AIDS that was later published as *Women, AIDS, and Activism* (Treichler, 97). ACT UP’s video collective, along with other video collectives such as Damned Interfering Video Activist Television (DIVA TV) and Testing the Limits (TTL), have used video to “document an activist response to the epidemic for others interested in imagining interventions in other locales, and... [to turn] the gaze of surveillance back onto the police, the CDC, the FDA, or whatever power structure was at hand” (Romàn, 83). North American AIDS organizations have distributed a multitude of pamphlets about the epidemic, as well as utilizing the internet to publish and communicate facts and myths surrounding the crisis. In a particularly visible action, the AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT) launched an advertising campaign entitled “Welcome to Condom Country”, which drew upon the recognizable forms, images and slogans of cigarette advertising to promote safer sex. The ads covered billboards, bus shelters, and garbage bins around Toronto’s downtown area, as well as being run in independent newspapers. They garnered attention from the mainstream press as well, appearing as news on the front page of one major newspaper and in an article inside another.

The visibility ACT attained through the “Welcome to Condom Country” campaign has by no means been granted to all of these countermedia campaigns. In many cases, the only audiences that such media are able to reach are those with prior interest in

and/or knowledge of the subject matter, and so often activists attempting to spread their messages through such means end up “preaching to the converted”. Due to financial constraints and expensive production costs, countermedia are often distributed on a small scale, and are unable to compete effectively with the influence of the dominant media. The large audiences receiving information via privately owned screen media are thus less likely to have access to alternative media sources. In turn, only those with the resources to create and distribute media to large audiences can get their messages to wider publics. Thus, in addition to creating alternative countermedia materials, “activists acknowledge the imperative to appear on the television screen alongside the staged image events of governments and states” (DeLuca and Peeples, 127).

In order to garner the attention of mainstream media, activist publics have used theatrics and eye-catching visual displays in street activism. Theatrics have been used in activism for at least the last century; as theorist Claudia Orenstein outlines,

from the suffragists at the beginning of the century who put on plays, marches, and large-scale pageants to publicize and win converts to their cause, to the agitprop pieces of the labor movement in the 1930s, to the work of the Bread and Puppet Theater and the San Francisco Mime Troupe in the 1960s, to the energetic actions of in the 1980s, the twentieth century was ablaze with agitational performances in support of social movements. (140)

However, more recent use of performance-based activism tends to be directed more specifically toward gaining public attention via screen media than activism in the past have been. Because, as I have mentioned, publics are so diverse and scattered across physical space, activists recognize that the way to publicize their messages is no longer solely to attract crowd to a particular protest, but rather to make sure that protest is captured by the “eye” of the mainstream media. As Orenstein points out, “in our current period of information glut... [activists] must compete for the public's attention and often

for airtime in a media-driven world that is already saturated with messages and eye-catching gimmicks” (140). Theatrics are a tactic used by activists to create image events to compete with those of states and corporations in control of far-reaching screen media.

While performance and art have been used in activism for more than a century, the concept of the image event is particular to the current context of a media-saturated public sphere. While many of the tactics of activism remain similar to those from which they are derived, the intent and the ways in which these actions are carried out have changed in relation to the technological and social transformations of techno-industrial culture. The image event is not only employed to gain visibility through spectacle; it is inserted into an image-laden public screen as a form of discourse. It rests on the power of screen media in public discussion, using the spectacle of mass demonstration to gain access to that discussion through the image it presents. For example, according to Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, AIDS activist art productions “function as an organizing tool, by conveying, in compressed form, information and political positions to others affected by the epidemic, to onlookers at demonstrations, and to the dominant media” (20). The images used in AIDS activism are designed not only to capture the media gaze, but also as a language through which to convey the actual goals of the movement.

As I have already outlined, contemporary publics are widely dispersed and heterogeneous. In addition, the multitude of available images in entertainment and informative media create a context in which publics perceive messages while in a state of distraction. Through the staging of large-scale, spectacular demonstrations with the specific intent of gaining access to the media screen, activist publics effectively perform

themselves into existence in a forum that may otherwise exclude them. DeLuca and Peeples argue that such activism represents activists' struggle to turn the gaze of the public screen back on those who control it financially and ideologically, "through the performance of image events, employing the consequent publicity as a social medium for forming public opinion and holding corporations and states accountable" (134).

ACT UP provides one of the most stirring examples of street-level theatrical action, having emerged as a direct action group in 1987 to bring attention not only to the misconceptions surrounding AIDS in American media, but also to the reluctance of U.S. government officials to provide any substantial funding for research into the disease. One of the main projects of ACT UP was "essentially to act out, insofar as acting out is understood to mean performing oneself into the visible field of representation, however unwelcome it may be for those it confronts" (Román, 84). Using "brilliant and savvy media-friendly soundbites, graphics and theatrics" (83), ACT UP bombarded the streets with very visible, very vocal enactments of the realities of marginalized communities facing the disease without any official support. Members performed "kiss-ins" and "die-ins" that would block traffic, made and distributed posters with the powerful slogan "Silence=Death", as well as creating pamphlets and other literature on safe sex and intravenous drug use. They targeted the U.S. government, the FDA, the *New York Times*, Wall Street, the Roman Catholic Church, and the general population of North America with their many actions. In what Judith Butler refers to as "theatrical rage", ACT UP deployed "a hyperbolic display of death and injury to overwhelm the epistemic resistance to AIDS and to the graphics of suffering" (*Bodies* 233).

Activist publics such as ACT UP have demonstrated that even though the mainstream media are very much a target of critical action, they can also be a tool in that very action. Activists seeking to use mainstream media as a tool to get their messages to the public must thus be able to communicate in the discourse of images. As Orenstein points out, “activists now need to master the use of technologies and advertising skills in order to compete with the mainstream media for the public's attention” (144). ACT’s “Welcome to Condom Country” campaign in Toronto demonstrates one of the ways that activists use the styles and conventions of advertising to make their messages accessible to a public sphere so saturated with advertising images that, according to Baudrillard, they “[monopolize] life in its exhibition” (“Ecstasy” 129). Mimicking American advertisements for Marlboro Cigarettes, the ads feature men riding on horses or motorcycles, with slogans such as “AIDS is on the rise in Toronto. Ride Safely”. The familiarity of the form and content of ACT’s advertisements made the campaign more easily comprehensible to a public accustomed to the conventions of advertising. Also, ACT effectively used irony in the campaign, placing an unexpected subversive message within a dominant, recognizable image. Both the familiarity and the “surprise element” perhaps can account for the greater publicity that this campaign received in comparison to other safe sex campaigns.

The Condom Country campaign demonstrates not only the way that activists have learned to utilize the conventions of mainstream media to reach wider audiences and potential publics, but also that activism of this kind has become more ephemeral. Safe sex campaigns are of course only a small part of what groups such as ACT attempt to promote. As Orenstein notes, the “generation of activists since ACT UP... are media

savvy and use the press to advance their own cause, working for short-term, immediate solutions to problems rather than holding out for outright revolution” (145). Furthermore, she argues that many activists see themselves as “battling an image of protests as dour, serious events in which people stand by passively listening to dull, long-winded speeches” (146). Sound bites are more easily digestible by mass audiences than manifestos; speeches and debates cannot compete with the public fascination with the blinking screen. Activist counterpublics must therefore be familiar with not only the technology and conventions of screen media, but also be able to create multiple and diverse messages in order to present a plethora of challenges to the dominant messages broadcast over mainstream screen media.

Activists in AIDS movements have used a variety of methods to challenge and subvert the multiple institutionalized narratives surrounding the epidemic. Treichler argues that “subversion cleared space for anger, politics, aggressive treatment and social service initiatives, safer sex campaigns, grassroots organizing and other collective actions, marches, media interventions, lawsuits, and a range of other responses” (325). AIDS activism has employed humour, ironic imagery, and anger in its response to the crisis. Even the memorializing of the dead has been a site for political movement; in the wake of so many deaths, activists have used names projects, the AIDS quilt, and political funerals as well as more darkly humoured projects such as burning teddy bears in funeral pyres to “pioneer new ways of burying their dead” (325). Crimp and Rolston maintain that

ACT UP’s humor is no joke. It has given us the courage to maintain our exuberant sense of life while every day coping with disease and death, and it has defended us against the pessimism endemic to other Left movements, from which we have otherwise taken so much. (20)

AIDS activist art embraces the celebration of life while nonetheless never losing sight of particular goals of the struggle to end the crisis. AIDS activist art, such as posters created for an arts institution by collective Gran Fury declaring “With 42,000 dead, Art is not enough” (Crimp and Rolston, 18-21), emphasizes the need to go beyond the aesthetic of AIDS graphics to effect real change. As Crimp and Rolston point out, “AIDS activist art is grounded in the accumulated knowledge and political analysis of the AIDS crisis produced collectively by the entire movement” (19-20). AIDS activist artists demonstrate some of the ways that solid critical analysis can be articulated through the practice of creating highly visible images to enter issues surrounding AIDS into public space and the public sphere.

Furthermore, much of the activism stemming from AIDS activist publics also recognizes that the issues that arise from state and media responses to the epidemic reach far further than the parameters of disease prevention and eradication. There are many interlaced concerns within the movement to end AIDS, including the power of large corporations, especially pharmaceuticals, the influence of corporations on government policy, the reach of North American policy into the lives of people living in countries of the South, to name but a few. In one surprising action, members of ACT UP infiltrated the newsrooms of “CBS Evening News with Dan Rather” and the “MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour” on PBS to protest the then recently commenced Gulf war in 1991. Drawing a connection between the American government’s reluctance to provide funding for research into an epidemic that was causing “higher mortality rates than wartime” (325) and a corresponding infusion of funds into the military, the activists called for an end to war. Activists in the CBS coup managed to shout “Fight AIDS, not Arabs” before the

network cut to a commercial, while activists at PBS were able to carry a sign with a similar message into the newsroom (Treichler, 141-142). With the newsroom coups, ACT UP was able to combine concerns over the war with the lack of funding for AIDS research and treatment in a momentary infiltration of the mass media screen.

ACT UP has endeavored to achieve multiplicity in its movements, reflecting the very diverse base of people who make up the AIDS activist public. Crimp and Rolston point to identity within the movement as not only something that is “coercively imposed by perceived sexual orientation or HIV status”, but also “willfully taken on, in defiant declaration of affinity with the ‘others’ of AIDS: queers, women, Blacks, Latinos, drug users, sex workers” (18). At different times, different “other” groups may arise from the larger movement in order to bring particular issues to the forefront of public discussion. The *Cosmo* action taken on by women of the New York chapter of ACT UP represents an instance of a subgroup of the AIDS activist public formed to contest misinformation about the epidemic that would affect that particular subgroup more directly than the movement as a whole. The actions and graphic demonstrations undertaken by groups such as ACT UP “codify concrete, specific issues of importance to the movement as a whole or to particular interests within it” (20).

Again it is apparent that a multitude of competing publics will more likely be able to present a diverse set of counterarguments to a screen-mediated public sphere than would an overarching public. The protests in Seattle against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in November of 1999 saw a barrage of various activist groups using theatrics and eye-catching tactics to contest corporate control over the world’s economy. Coming together from very different and sometimes conflicting platforms, these groups

were able to create a large-scale spectacle of sheer numbers to counter the presence of the Clinton administration and American interests in becoming the frontrunners of Free Trade. Activist Andrew Boyd comments, “I watched a hundred sea turtles face down riot cops, a gang of Santas stumble through a cloud of tear gas, and a burly Teamster march shoulder to shoulder with a pair of Lesbian Avengers naked to the waist except for a strip of black electric tape across each nipple” (qtd. in Orenstein, 139). The extremely broad base of organizations from which the protest arose suggests not only that there was (and is) mass opposition to centralized control over world trade and finances, but also that there is great potential for resistance along diverse and disjunctive lines of alliance.

The very diverse range of activist groups at the WTO protests serves as a living example of what Butler proposes as an approach of “antifoundationalist” coalition (*Gender Trouble* 21). Antifoundationalist coalition politics are formed and enacted without the end goal of unity. Rather, this kind of coalition attempts “to acknowledge its contradictions and take action with those contradictions intact” (20). Instead of assuming knowledge of the trajectory of the action in advance, antifoundationalist coalition “entails... the acceptance of divergence, breakage, splinter and fragmentation as part of the often tortuous process of democratization” (20). Thus, rather than to imagine a coherent, universal subject position from which to engage in struggle and for whom to seek benefit, this kind of strategy, according to Butler, allows “identities [to] come into being and dissolve depending on the concrete practices that constitute them” (22). According to the task at hand, then, action can emerge from various points of departure, not only in the sense of multiple and distinct groups, but also in that of the sometimes conflicting sensibilities and intentions of one person. According to Butler, “certain

political practices institute identities on a contingent basis in order to accomplish whatever aims are in view” (22). Action, in this case, is taken not in one unified front in continuous manner against an overpowering structure; rather, it is a series of smaller fronts enacting multiple attacks as they arise, in an ephemeral, task-driven manner. Furthermore, consensus is not necessarily the end goal; instead, a multitude of dissenting voices may align strategically to specific ends.

Antifoundationalist coalition, because it arises from multiple positions which form and dissolve depending on the task at hand, is thus used as a strategy for resisting easy commodification of activist movements. The more dynamic a movement remains, the less easily it can be packaged in palatable forms and appropriated in a depoliticized form into the dominant hegemonic discourse of mass media production. In addition to performed image events and highly visible artistic displays, AIDS activists have also prepared a number of multimedia productions to gain access to screen-mediated public discussion. The internet, which, according to Kellner, is “competing with television as the dominant medium of our time” (*Media Spectacle* 14-15), hosts a multitude of AIDS activist sites, some employing highly sophisticated design to convey the dynamics of AIDS movements through images of resistance over the last twenty years and through links to studies, campaigns, and resources for further exploration of the many issues arising from the crisis. The internet provides particular possibilities for activist counterpublics to participate in screen-mediated public discussion because, although online commercial activity is certainly abundant, the internet itself is not owned by or affiliated with one or more particular private interests. Anyone with access to the internet can use it to enter into public debate, not only through the creation of websites, but also

through online discussion via email, chatrooms, forums, blogs (online journals), and bulletin boards.

Of course, access remains a complicated obstacle to participatory parity in the public sphere as it is mediated through screen media. Nancy Fraser argues that “in [stratified] societies, full parity of participation in public debate and deliberation is not within the reach of possibility” (“Rethinking” 80), because the larger social context encompasses specific formal and informal structures that subordinate specific groups to others. Thus, a conception of the public sphere that takes into context the shape of public discussion across media screens must identify and critique the gaps of inequality between publics. In her discussion of global justice movements, Kristine Wong argues that “the media has [sic] an integral role in the future direction of the movement”, maintaining that “media images, whether they are mainstream or independent, need to go beyond the protests and focus on the real issues of corporate-led globalization” (224). Wong argues further that “true sharing of leadership would require elites to sacrifice some of their organizations’ power and funding” (224) to support under funded and less powerful groups, especially those led by people of colour and working class people, whom she argues are disproportionately affected by capitalist globalization. Wong’s arguments underpin the notion that groups who are truly devoted to achieving voice in the public sphere through collaboration need to share more than just a presence at the same demonstrations.

It is no small endeavor to open up access to the public sphere as it is mediated through mass media beyond the ideological parameters of those who control and produce it. There is, however, some evidence of a commitment on the parts of some more

powerful counterpublics toward enabling, as much as possible, participatory parity for those groups with less power. Orenstein argues that “in a world where global corporations wield power without any centralized authority, activists likewise remain decentralized and attempt to unite as many people and relevant causes as possible” (151). Possibly the most vivid recent example of an activist counterpublic using media-savvy tactics to unite multiple movements in order to gain a voice that would otherwise go unheard is the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico. While the aims of the movement itself were very local, “directed toward mending traditional abuses and injustices against the indigenous communities and asking for the establishment of an authentic democracy” (Paz, 32), the way that rebels put technology to use in garnering attention for their cause was innovative. Drawing together the connections between oppressions faced in a variety of subaltern communities, the Zapatistas used the internet as a tool to contact and draw attention from diverse counterpublics, both in the South and in the North (Klein, 114-123). With the figure of Subcomandante Marcos presenting eloquent and imaginative speeches to press conferences and in activist films, the Chiapas movement “revealed a noteworthy control over an art that the modern mass media has [sic] evolved to a dangerous perfection: public relations” (Paz, 32). Although the brief success of the Zapatistas movement has been something of an anomaly, their ability to use the media of both the internet and television publicity reveals some insight into the direction that publics have begun to take to enter into public discussion as it plays across media screens.

Conclusion

The influence of screen media such as television, the internet, and newspapers on public opinion in North America is clearly very powerful. To Habermas, the ubiquity of the mass media in opinion formation signaled the decline of the public sphere as an arena of debate and public discussion. However, as I have attempted to outline in this paper, while the prevalence of screen media in North American everyday life has a distinct effect on the ways that discussion is conducted, it does not necessarily preclude participation in the public sphere. As Claudia Orenstein argues, “amid the clamor and control of mass international cultural as well as economic monopolies, reclaiming the cultural sphere is as important a job for activists today as any other political goal” (140). The policies of North American governing bodies and corporations have implications that reach far beyond the boundaries of North America. In response, many activist publics have acted on an imperative to keep these governing bodies and corporations in check.

Habermas’ model of the public sphere is not sufficient to account for current technological and social conditions, but it is apparent from the continuing centrality of the notion of the public sphere in contemporary critical theory that we should continue with his attempts to outline a public sphere that stands in critical opposition to state and corporate powers. In this paper I have attempted to imagine a public sphere that takes into consideration the changing social conditions in a cultural environment marked by the presence of screen media. To conceive of a public sphere adequate to fit the needs of current critical theory we need to include a consideration of not only the limitations but also the possibilities that screen media present. Thus, in my rethinking of the public sphere I have focused specifically on the ways that publics have formed around the media,

creating alternative media and staging image events to gain access to mainstream media, in order to compete with and contest the dominant messages being disseminated via privately owned screen media.

AIDS activism has provided more examples of the possibilities available for public discussion and dissent in a public sphere mediated through the screen than I could possibly touch upon in one discussion. AIDS activists have demonstrated how multifaceted a movement can be, how vibrant and how angry. In the face of countless obstacles presented by a corporate media intent only on making profits by employing established and packageable narratives of fear and hatred surrounding the epidemic, AIDS activists nonetheless have taken on the media and used it to fight against misrepresentations of AIDS. Through the production of countermedia calling for state action to end the epidemic, mass demonstrations that disrupt the everyday flow of traffic and bring attention to the crisis, eye-catching and dramatic visual displays, and a myriad of publications online, in magazines, videos, and books, AIDS activists have employed media strategies in order to claim a space in a public sphere dominated by privately owned media screens.

AIDS activist publics have recognized the importance of gaining access to screen media in order to participate in the public sphere. The limitations of such a public sphere are certainly formidable, as I have discussed in this paper. However, as Treichler argues,

television... is not monolithic. Rather, like every other cultural form, it offers openings and opportunities for intervention. Furthermore, television's unique power to shape public opinion means that, in the current crisis, we cannot afford to dismiss it as unsalvageable. (128)

Her arguments are equally applicable to other screen media, such as the internet, which has become a dominant medium in the households of North America. AIDS activist

publics in North America have grown out of an indignant anger and a desperate need for some kind of opposition to government inaction in the face of the growing crisis. Their tactics have varied according to the short term goals at hand and to the people or subgroups involved in a given action. Their adept use of advertising techniques and media savvy images and slogans has inspired activists in other movements, such as global justice movements, to be innovative in their approaches to activism in order to garner the attention of the media screen. As Orenstein notes, activists in more recent movements look to “earlier examples from which to draw tactics and models for effective political performance” (140). Activist publics have a wealth of tactics, from image production and performance to polemic writing and speechmaking, and learn from each other how best to bring their issues to the forefront of public discussion.

Activist counterpublics such as those I have discussed in this paper demonstrate not only the ways that the ubiquity of the media screen in public life has impacted public discussion, but also some of the possibilities that this impact has opened for participation in the public sphere. Habermas himself suggests that the public sphere

could only exist today, under altered circumstances, as a rational reorganization of social and political power under the mutual control of rival organizations committed to the public sphere in their internal structure as well as in their relations with the state and one another. (“The Public Sphere” 107)

By including an examination of media in our conception of the public sphere as it exists in the current techno-industrial culture of North America, we can begin to analyze and critique the reorganization of power as it is negotiated among emergent activist publics that may compete, communicate, and cooperate with one another in order to mediate between the state, corporate powers, and civil society.

I have opted not to reject the mass media screen as a potential site of public debate and discussion because I maintain that it is crucial that we do not sacrifice the media as a potential site for public discussion, while keeping in mind and focusing critique on its limitations. Benjamin argues that “the adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope, as much for thinking as for perception” (223). The way that publics have arisen from and engaged with screen media points to the adaptability of mass movements in the face of vast changes in social organization and technology. That said, I also contend that it is insufficient to embrace the glittering stream of images with uncritical enthusiasm and to engage in action which relies exclusively on interacting with prevailing media practices. Rather, I am suggesting that in order to conceptualize an adequate public sphere to meet the needs of contemporary critical theory, we must recognize our new relationship to the public via the screen, which will require updating obsolete approaches to changing circumstances, while not losing sight of the social relations and historical structures that work to create those circumstances.

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