The Citizen Audience

Crowds, publics, and individuals

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Introduction
The politics of audiences in America

Americans spend a remarkable amount of time as audiences: adults spent over nine hours per day using media in 2004, more than half of all waking hours; and this does not include unmediated live performances and spectator sports, let alone church and school where people act largely as audiences.\(^1\) It is important therefore what is said about these audiences. Today, as in the past, people have been criticized for how they play their role as entertainment audiences. Audiences have been depicted variously as good or bad, threatening public order or politically disengaged, cultivated or cultural dupes, ideal citizens or pathological, and so on. This book seeks to make sense out of the profusion of representations of audiences in the historical record and the political implications of those representations.

We have talked a lot about audiences. This talk most often has occurred when others considered them problematic. To governing classes, audiences, especially of people of subordinate status, often have been a subject of concern and objects of regulation. Before the spread of mass-mediated entertainment in the twentieth century, audiences of live entertainment were the most common large gatherings of persons, aside from church-going and the street. Entertainment venues were unlike churches, where they were under the secure control of a reputable leader, and more like the streets where they were less controlled or predictable. Depicted as volatile crowds and a danger to social order, audiences became targets of government discipline. More recently, the spread of radio, television, and other home media expanded considerably the size of audiences and the time spent as audiences, and this development alarmed many and generated much discussion. In this instance, audiences were seen as a mass of isolated individuals who were vulnerable to manipulation or distracted from their responsibilities as citizens. The preferred audience to both crowds and isolated individuals was a public, people who used their leisure responsibly to fulfill their civic duties.
Audiences have long been conceived as crowds, publics or mass, even before these terms were specifically used to describe them. I do not mean that audiences have always and only been depicted in these terms, but that these are recurring themes. I use these terms as metaphors capturing the imagery of audiences of the times, to show how we talked about audiences as if they were politically significant actors. Representations of bad audiences, while not directly invoking the language of citizenship, use characterizations that are opposites to those of good citizens.

Since the emergence of commercial entertainment in late sixteenth-century England, government officials reacted to audiences at live entertainments as crowds that were incipient mobs and threats to social order. Interrupting this tendency to depict audiences as problems were occasional highly political periods when a counter-discourse gained ascendancy, and self-consciously political theater or media defined audiences, or audiences defined themselves, as political actors in a public sphere. More often, however, the image of publics has been associated with news media and distinguished from entertainment audiences, which have been characterized as bad citizens for not using their time to inform themselves. Entertainment audiences have also been contrasted to arts audiences, and chastised for not cultivating themselves, a pre-requisite to preparing oneself for citizenship, especially in older conceptions of the good citizen. Thus there has been a second criticism of entertainment audiences as lackluster citizens who fail to cultivate and inform themselves. The concept of mass—as distinct from “masses,” which I will discuss later—is a term of the twentieth century, when social critics gradually but increasingly became less concerned with crowds and more with an inert mass and isolated individuals. By mid-century, television arrived when there was already a heightened concern about the isolating effects of media, stunting individual development, distracting adults from their responsibilities and brainwashing both adults and children, threatening civilization and democracy. These images reflect concerns by governments or by some citizens who petition government to rein in audiences as crowds, or to protect and arouse them as vulnerable, passive members of the mass; or alternately to applaud and encourage them as publics. They advocate regulation to realize the good possibilities, while preventing the bad aspects of audience practices.²

The images were always evaluative and normative, and the standard of evaluation was the conscientious, cultivated, and informed citizen. Crowds were bad citizens; mass and isolated individuals were weak and vulnerable citizens; publics were good citizens. Moreover, the evaluation was class-based and reinforced class and other social hierarchies.³ To behave as a crowd or mass was an expression of lower or working-class culture and poor citizenship; to behave
as a public was an expression of bourgeois or upper-middle-class culture and good citizenship.

**Whose discourse?**

Both participants and observers have depicted audiences. Participants have always represented themselves through their performances as audiences. The noun “audiences” makes it appear—and often makes us think—that audience is an identity that people carry into every situation and interaction. But audience is a situated role that people temporarily perform, and in their performance people produce representations of audiences.\(^4\) Also, the role is situated in institutions of entertainment, news, and media that construct subject positions for audiences and, in so doing, represent audiences. Governments, moral entrepreneurs, and others outside this relationship too have represented audiences through their discourse and response to audiences.

At times, I will discuss how audiences have constructed themselves, mostly to indicate the presence and influence of counter-discourses. These representations often are alternative definitions of appropriate citizen behavior that dispute dominant discourses that characterize them as ill-mannered or ill-informed, failed citizens. Alternative discourses, however, expressed as they were through ephemeral enactments, seldom took the form of enduring records available directly to historical researchers. The record of self-representations by subordinate peoples was mostly compiled by and filtered through bystanders.\(^5\)

This study focuses mostly on representations of audiences as “other,” that refer to audiences as “they” rather than “we,” arising as entertainment, news and media productions construct their audiences, and as discourses originating outside production characterize and critique the audiences produced. The historical sources I have used are durable excerpts from mass media—primarily print media. These record mostly the dominant discourses that exercised more influence upon institutional action toward audiences. By this I mean discourses that are what literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin called “authoritative” and what social theorist Michel Foucault conceived as knowledge/power. Such discourse is dominant in the sense that it is backed by the power of the largest institutions of the society. Part of this power comes from the reach of the speaker; and part comes from the acceptance of the voices, their cultural authority, their political legitimacy. Dominant discourses appear in media with greater amplification power, and echo in the offices of government and other organizations with the power to regulate and shape audiences.

Dominant representations of audiences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were bourgeois, made by flaneurs who had the time to observe and to
write and publish; by gatekeepers such as journalists, critics and commentators, academic researchers and intellectuals, educational and health professionals who wrote about the worth of things such as entertainment, media and audiences; by theater and media owners and managers who set the rules of engagement and marketing for audiences; and by government officials who held hearings and established regulations. Given that this study focuses on dominant bourgeois discourse, it should come as no surprise that such discourse contained a hierarchical message, praising some statuses and debasing others. The discourses tended to equate good audiences with the middle and upper classes, Euro-Americans and males; bad audiences typically were identified with the working and lower classes, women and subordinate races.6

Citizen

Discourses on audiences can be understood as judgments of fitness for citizenship.7 Representing audiences as publics draws explicitly on this idea of responsibilities of citizenship. Representing audiences as crowds and as isolated individuals paints pictures of audience attributes that are diametrically opposite to those prescribed for citizens. What pervades these discourses on audiences is a citizenship in the sense of civic republicanism in which people are expected to have rights as citizens and a duty to participate actively in their own governance. This was a citizenship with characteristics that were defined as decidedly masculine, white, and bourgeois.8

Within this sort of citizenship, scholars distinguish between ancient Greek and Roman concepts of citizenship in which civic virtue is central and a modern liberal concept in which civil rights are central. Inherent in the ancient concept is an idea that only a select group who has the capacity for civic virtue can act as citizens. Aristotle considered citizenship to be the means through which men attain their full civilized potential. Civic virtue required a strong moral character and the time, ability, and commitment to devote to the community interest. Such a citizen could set aside self-interest and act in the interest of the whole.9 This concept of citizenship as a privilege for a select group of qualified individuals was revived in modern times. A select few, the propertied classes, were presumed to have the independence and the will to pursue knowledge and the character to transcend their narrow self-interest for the sake of the common good.

Countervailing this exclusive citizenship was the liberalism that arose in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. Reason and individualism defined its ideal relations of people in public spaces and of people to the state. John Locke argued for a social contract among men as the basis of government, in place of fealty between king and subject, implying equal and universal rights and allowing
independent individuals to pursue their own interests, so long as they did not infringe on others. John Stuart Mill’s nineteenth-century liberalism continued the premise of universal natural rights that led logically to universal suffrage.¹⁰

Liberalism in practice, however, incorporated the older idea of citizenship as a privilege of the qualified. Locke argued for citizenry restricted to a propertied class; Mill worried about the civic virtue of the mass. For Mill in the 1860s, citizenship was “the grand cultivator of mankind.” He believed that, more than self-interest or natural right, citizenship was about self-improvement as a patriotic endeavor. Instead of differentiating people in terms of inherent character, liberalism emphasized achievement of knowledge and culture by self-improvement as the qualification for citizens. But Mill believed that not all individuals were capable of sufficient cultivation; one had to be educated and civilized. He favored educational and property criteria for suffrage.¹¹ Advocates of liberalism were not different than many of their peers of the time in differentiating among citizens, whether by nature or nurture, as to their capability to fulfill the duties of citizenship. They argued that property signified a commitment to the community and a level of cultivation and education necessary to sound civic decision making. Women, subordinate races and classes, and children were defined as inferior in rationality and therefore excluded from certain rights.¹²

The history of American citizenship incorporates both the ancient republican and modern liberal traditions.¹³ Sociologist Michael Schudson’s sequence of four citizenship eras is a convenient framework for organizing this brief discussion. During the Revolution, Americans adopted the ideas that men are equal in natural rights and that governments served these men and their rights. The American Declaration of Independence stated it boldly that governments derive “their just powers from the consent of the governed.” A decade later, during the debate over the new Constitution, Federalist James Madison repeated almost the identical words, “[government] derives all its powers directly or indirectly from the body of the people.” They placed at the center of their argument the “self-evident” fact of the natural rights of all men to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” rejecting the hierarchical relation of king and subject, and shifting the ground of citizenship from privilege to rights. Historian Joyce Appleby characterized liberalism as unexamined assumptions that were so embedded in the culture that they seemed simply reality. The core of this liberalism was rational self-interest enacted through free choice, free inquiry, and freedom of religion.¹⁴

However, on the issue of who qualified for citizenship, the American founders adopted the ancient republican belief in a citizenship of civic virtue, restricted to those whose property and economic self-reliance assured they were free from coercion and understood and promoted the public interest. Property also freed one from labor and allowed time necessary to develop knowledge and cultivation.
These were the foundation of the culture of deference. They excluded artisans and laborers who had little or no property and depended upon laboring, and slaves, servants, wives and children who were subservient to their masters, husbands, and fathers. This active, virtuous citizenship, a republicanism based in ancient notions of civic virtue but including modern liberalism, was the first definition of citizenship at the beginning of the new nation. While elites naturally favored this definition, common folk did as well, to the degree that they had to defer to gentlemen upon whom they depended as patrons for their livelihood.

But the Revolution also stirred beliefs that (at least white male) common folk were in ways equals to gentlefolk, the culture of deference began to fade, and a new “democratic moment” emerged in the Jacksonian era. At the same time, artisans were becoming proletarianized and class differences sharpened. This new proletariat believed that their interests were not those of the gentlemen of virtue, but were conflicting interests, and that people should form parties to compete with others to advance their interests. This partisan citizenship rejected the idea that only gentlemen possessed the civic virtue for full citizenship, relabeling gentle leisure as idleness and professing that it was labor that was virtuous. States lowered the requirements of property and added as alternative qualifiers tax-paying, military service, labor on public projects, or simply residency, broadening the electorate to include almost all white males. The grassroots influence of political parties would remain politically potent, although changed by Progressivism, into the 1960s.

Schudson’s third era of informed citizenship, that encompasses most of the history of this book, might be thought of as the era of the middle class. With the growth of enterprises owned by capitalist investors, opportunities for clerks to found their own businesses narrowed. A new class of accounting and supervising employees and of retainers to such companies grew into a new middle class. Through the nineteenth century they increasingly distanced themselves from the working class and then from the rapacious reputation of the new industrial upper class. They rejected the proletarian spectacle of political parties; their ideal of the informed citizen was one who educated himself, deliberated on the issues of the day, and voted individually and privately. In practice, much of this deliberation took place through local private associations of peers, such as the fraternal organizations popular in this era.

Progressive and philosopher John Dewey defined the informed citizen as a category that included people’s relationship to the state and governance as well as membership in the community governed by that state, be it a village, city or nation. This accent on community replaced the earlier emphasis on privacy with a new emphasis on citizens as members of publics. Dewey conceived citizens acting cooperatively and in concert to solve community problems and establish
public institutions (such as schools) as remedies, charging governments to sustain them. His citizens did not simply pursue their private interests (as consumers, property owners, investors, parents), but were cognizant of their community membership and civic obligations, as Mill imagined. This ideal of the informed citizen remained dominant through the mid-twentieth century, continuing to be influential through the 1970s when the media infrastructure that regularly paid it homage through the voices of professional journalism, began to transform.19

Beyond republicanism and liberalism is a broader, cultural sense of citizenship that extends and underlies specifically political citizenship. The good citizen was conceived as an exemplar of his national culture. A citizen in this sense not only performed his civic duty, but exemplified the central values, beliefs and norms of the dominant culture. In the United States, the good citizen represented what it meant to be an American. This included much more than political values and civic virtue narrowly construed; at times, it included civic virtue, cultivation, respectability, and other cultural standards that tended to be those of the middle class.

Cultural citizenship was exclusionary. As political scientist Rogers Smith phrased it, through most of American history lawmakers drew the boundaries of citizenship in terms of “illiberal and undemocratic racial, ethnic and gender hierarchies,” based upon simple beliefs in essential differences rather than the universal rights of liberalism. Throughout these citizenship eras, many groups were excluded from citizenship for their ascribed qualities: Native Americans were excluded as “savages,” lacking the basic prerequisite of civilization; free African Americans lost their legal right to vote in 1857, regained it during Reconstruction, lost it again in the Jim Crow era, and regained it again only in 1965. All European Americans were citizens if born in a U.S. territory; and they were admitted freely as immigrants with rights to seek citizenship until national quotas were introduced in 1924. Wives lost their independent citizenship in 1855, and from 1907 to 1931 American women who married foreigners could lose their citizenship. The egalitarianism of the liberal tradition was confined mostly to white men, and was, as Smith explained, “surrounded by an array of fixed ascriptive hierarchies” that excluded groups subordinate to them. This attitude of advocating informed citizenship while holding reservations about the inclusion of some groups is well illustrated by a Progressive, John Wheelwright, arguing in 1889 for the Americanization of immigrants as informed citizens, but noting “the problem here is complicated by the presence of the African race [and] the Chinaman,” both of whom he wished to exclude. These distinctions reveal that citizenship consistently has been limited by race, class, and gender; and we will see that the same distinctions attended the application of citizenship standards to audiences. Schudson proposes a most recent form of citizenship that
emphasizes civil rights and the dismantling of these citizenship hierarchies, which gained ascendancy in the 1960s, but this postdates the period covered by this study.  

Smith emphasized the simultaneity rather than sequencing of these different types of citizenship, delineating a history in which liberal, republican, and ascriptive ideologies co-existed and competed, even though one type may predominate in any given era, as the result of political contests and compromises rather than a steady progression. According to Smith, “by 1912 all the main reformulations of American civic ideologies that would compete in the rest of the twentieth century were already visible.” It is the definition of informed citizenship, with its ideal of including all but distinguishing between ideal and inadequate citizens, that often inspired media criticism and the shaping of the Citizen Audience.

Criticisms of audiences and of media implicitly represent audiences as citizens or presumptive citizens whose experience as audiences could or should prepare them to better perform their citizenship. When critics described audiences failing in this civic duty, whether as the fault of media institutions, technology, or audience members themselves, media and audiences have been condemned. Crowd psychology condemned audiences because they allegedly acted irrationally or in an uncultivated manner, when rational deliberation and cultivation were presumed fundamental to informed citizenship. When reformers worried about immigrant nickelodeon audiences, they were defining the audiences as presumptive citizens, and the movies as having a duty to Americanize them. When critics lambasted television for aesthetic degradation of the populace or impairing the education of children by displacing reading and other healthier activities, they were presuming a civic role of television and of its audiences.

Audiences were differentiated not only in terms of their performance of citizenship, but also in term of their status. Audiences of subordinate groups were unsatisfactory citizens. This confirmed and reinforced the hierarchies of citizenship, differentiating propertied white males from subordinate groups, a parallel between discourses on audiences and on citizenship, as Smith has shown, with the addition of class to his argument. This discursive subordination buttressed an in-egalitarian system.

Crowd

Audiences are one example of temporary gatherings. Sociologist Herbert Blumer defined three terms to triangulate and distinguish people in such settings: crowds, publics, and mass. The relation of audiences to these concepts may at first appear obscure, but actually is quite intimate. On the one hand, audiences have long
been characterized in these terms. On the other hand, one aspect of defining the
nature and operations of these categories of gatherings has been to conceive them
as audiences.

Sociologically, crowds are defined as gatherings of people physically together
and sharing a common activity. They are contrasted to a mass that is a dispersed
population. Both of these are distinguished from publics that exhibit a dimension
of debate or discussion absent in a crowd or mass. Conventional crowds are those
that have been sponsored and orchestrated by established organizations. Their
behavior is routinized. Other gatherings, however, occur outside the bounds of
established conventions, and tend to be seen as a danger to the social order.
Through history the sensitivity of authorities to the danger of conventional
crowds becoming unconventional ones has varied.24 Audiences are an example
of conventional crowds who become problematic when they overstep the bounds
and challenge authority. It is concern about these unconventional crowds that has
generated fear as well as explanations of how this happens. These explanations
have tended to presume that crowds are homogenous and monolithic, irrational
and violent, and composed primarily of people of low social status and little
education.

Etymologically, today “crowd” is a relatively neutral term, implying nothing
more than the ubiquitous aggregations of miscellaneous people in public spaces;
“mob,” an active crowd not under secure control by authorities and disrupting
social order, is seldom used. Crowds and the common people had been
synonymous in the minds of elites as far back as ancient Rome. In England, at
least as early as the Elizabethan era, crowds in urban settings, while not feared
and suppressed, were nevertheless the subject of official concern and even
surveillance, as a source of disorder and violence. “Mob” appeared in English in
the seventeenth century after the Restoration as an abbreviation of *mobile vulgus*,
or “fickle populace,” the lower orders of society presumed to be mercurial about
whom and what they favored. In the nineteenth century, crowd and mob were
commonly linked in print, both suggestive of violence. The fear was based on the
presumption that the crowd was composed of lower-class people who were
believed to have little invested in the established order and little to lose in
disrupting that order.25

Elite ideas of crowds have undergone two major shifts over the past two
centuries. Authorities of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were more
tolerant of what we would call riots than would be accepted in the late nineteenth
or twentieth centuries in the United States. Elites tolerated crowds as nuisances
necessary for defusing discontent, as long as they did not threaten existing class
relations or genteel property and privileges. Scholars have documented two types
of crowd action, riots and carnival. Several prominent historians demonstrated
that when lower sorts in England and elsewhere from the early modern period into the beginnings of industrialization resorted to protests and riots, these actions were not irrational, nor spontaneous, nor violent against persons; more often they were planned to right what was perceived as a detrimental change in traditional arrangements, evidenced a grievance, a culprit and a goal, and directed violence against property more than persons. Crowds exercised what British historian Edward P. Thompson called a moral economy, the right of lower sorts to enforce traditional terms of exchange and mutual obligation. For common folk, as subjects without the rights and obligations of citizenship, crowd action was their only avenue of political expression, a means to gain attention of the crown and his officials whose obligation it was to right injustices, as measured by custom. At the same time, elites and authorities recognized such rights, as long as these actions remained within traditional bounds.  

Crowds also were part of the long-standing tradition of carnival. Across early modern Europe carnival was integral to the liturgical calendar through the winter after Christmas, culminating the week before Lent as a festival before the fast. In England, carnival encompassed a wide range of rituals and ceremonies that punctuated the year. The ruling principle of carnival was disorder, a “world turned upside down.” Drunkenness and sexual promiscuity were more tolerated. Commoners dressed as kings, men as women. Inferiors were allowed to mimic and show disrespect of their superiors. Commoners even might use this opportunity to exercise a moral economy and chastise their superiors who they believed had violated custom or morals over the past year.

Protests as well as festive crowds of these times were constrained by familiarity. In small, rooted communities, everyone knew who was behind the mask and who did what during carnival. People could be held accountable because others knew them. Disorder was more likely to be within the bounds of traditional acceptance, even if that boundary allowed a good deal by modern standards.

This constraint would weaken as cities grew, leading to greater concern about crowds that were now larger and more anonymous. In the nineteenth century, crowds came to be defined in more negative terms, politically, socially, and aesthetically. Crowds continued to be equated with lower classes. But such classes now were seen as unconstrained and dangerous. The crowd was redefined as a fearful mob, an irrational and destructive beast, spurred by emotion and reckless in its actions. A major turning point was the French Revolution, when Edmund Burke in England decried the sans culottes in the streets. Through the nineteenth century, according to historian Robert Nye, there remained strong sentiments among the educated of France against the crowds of the Revolution. These ideas percolated through the nineteenth century, appearing in such popular science as

This new, scientistic rendering of crowds received its most widely read expression in Gustave Le Bon’s 1895 book, *The Crowd*. Le Bon conceived crowds as people who had lost their individuality, reason and will—and he conceived audiences as types of crowd. According to him, witnessing an event or listening to a speaker amidst a crowd, people become caught up in the crowd emotions and act with one mind. Clearly, crowds were antithetical to ideas of rational and independent citizenship. This concept of the irrational crowd driven by a crowd mind, predominated through the nineteenth century, and continued to be important, even in the social sciences, for much of the twentieth century. Robert Park, a central figure in shaping American sociology, wrote that the effect of crowds “is always more or less disruptive and revolutionary,” casting them as a danger to social order.  

Crowd psychology also incorporated racial theory, claiming that some groups were inherently more susceptible to this crowd phenomenon. When individuals in crowds lost their reason they acted according to a racial “soul,” baring the “sentiments” of the race of the nation. Implicit in this formulation was the conception of individuals in a crowd driven by racial instincts, that is, lower mental faculties, and their relation to the crowd as a common race or “tribe.” Those perceived to be more primitive and less mentally developed would be more likely to participate in a crowd. Le Bon described a hierarchy with lower classes, women, and certain races and nationalities as more primitive and more likely to make up the bulk of crowds. Le Bon and others who advocated crowd psychology expressed the concern that the responsibilities of citizenship should be restricted to groups less susceptible to crowds, another example of what Rogers Smith called ascriptive citizenship. 

**Public**

Sociologists have long defined publics as the categorical opposite of crowds, diffuse rather than assembled. Political theories have characterized publics as discussion rather than action-oriented, deliberative rather than impulsive, rational rather than emotional. It is a term with many meanings, etymologically and conceptually. Political theorist Jeffrey Weintraub identifies four distinct usages of the term: public as in the political sphere; public in the economic sense of state ownership versus private ownership, public as sociability and as public space where it may occur, and public as contrasted to the private domestic sphere of family. The first sense of public is the primary focus here, the idea of publics, public opinion, public sphere and their relation to the state. The second plays a
part in the story insofar as media and entertainments are products and enterprises of private corporations who influence the representations of audiences. The third is intertwined with the concept of community and its opposite, with public places as sites of community, the mass and the consequences for forming political publics. The last is part of the story insofar as middle-class withdrawal or confinement to the domestic sphere has been implicated in the vitality of publics and the exclusions of women from publics.33

Publics in the political sense have been conceptualized as bound up with media. Unlike crowds, publics are dispersed and therefore necessitate means of communication. In one of the first formulations of the concept at the turn of the twentieth century, French theorist Gabriel Tarde linked publics to newspapers. More than a half century later, projecting his concept of public sphere onto eighteenth-century London and Paris, Jurgen Habermas also described print media playing an important role in the conversation of public houses and other public places.34 The second characteristic feature of publics in both Tarde’s and Habermas’ concepts, was conversation. This reflects the consistent conceptualizing of publics in terms of discussion and the conceptual neglect of its relation to action. Indeed, most theorists have discussed public discussion as leading to “public opinion,” not public action, with the presumption that elected officials of a democratic state would be influenced by opinion.

Tarde said that his was the era of the public, not the era of the crowd, as Le Bon had claimed. He argued that crowds are monolithic since one can be part of only one crowd at a time, since we can be in only one place at a time; while publics, being dispersed, are not monolithic, since one can simultaneously participate in several publics, thus acting as counterweights to each other so that, participating in each, we are likely to be more tolerant of all. The implication was that publics would therefore be less bound by emotional attachment to the group, its members more independent and individual, discussion more rational and deliberative, more civilized and tolerant than crowds. In each aspect of his definition he mentioned reasoned thought, in contrast to Le Bon’s impulsive, emotional crowd.35

Tarde argued that dispersed publics required coordination through some means of common communication. His choice of newspapers as the medium of publics reflects the fundamental conception of publics as concerned with politics and with the state. At the time, newspapers provided the common object of attention equivalent to that providing coherence for a crowd. Between 1869 and 1912 in Paris the number of newspapers per person rose dramatically. Witnessing people’s reactions to reading the papers during the Dreyfus affair, Tarde observed the public become a unit not through assembly and suggestion as crowds were believed to, but through simultaneously reading the news and discussing it. By
defining newspapers as a necessary pre-condition for a public, he effectively defined publics as audiences. An audience of readers, however, was considered rational, in contrast to a theater audience crowd that was considered emotional. Reading would trigger discussion rather than riot.

Tarde also claimed that the newspaper by itself did not create a public or public opinion. To constitute a public, readers had to converse with each other about what they read in newspapers. He defined conversation as casual social interaction for its own sake, linking the sociable concept of public to the political. Through conversation, information spread from person to person, producing public opinion. Tarde called conversation, “the strongest agent of imitation, of the propagation of sentiments, ideas, and modes of action,” because it produces the greatest intensity of attention.16

Tarde defined public opinion as “a more or less logical cluster of judgments which, responding to current [social] problems, is reproduced many times over in people. . . .” By placing reading at the center of his public, he emphasized rationality in opinion formation. By placing conversation centrally he emphasized that a public builds upon individual will rather than a collective mind. For him, opinion formation was primarily an individual process, an act of independent will, in contrast to the crowd’s loss of individuality. There could be disagreement in a public. Each individual, in conversing with others, plays an independent part in shaping the public opinion. Tarde’s conclusion that publics were tolerant of more than one point of view implied that it would therefore also be more rational, critical and deliberative through conversation.17

Robert Park, an important pioneer in American sociology, shared Tarde’s view on publics. Like Tarde, he contrasted homogeneity of mind in the crowd to the individual differences retained in publics. He indicated no concern whether publics were assembled or dispersed. Instead, he contrasts crowd and public in terms of emotion versus reason, action versus deliberation. Himself a former journalist, he saw journalism as the mediator of public opinion and, reacting to the yellow journalism of his day, emphasized newspapers’ duty “to instruct and direct public opinion.” He insisted that newspapers should provide the facts that must be the basis of discussion among members of a public. Park asserted that differences of viewpoint are critical to publics. Differences produce “prudence and rational reflection” before action. Without difference, publics dissolve into crowds whose drives are not contained by critical thought. The difference between Park and Tarde perhaps reflects differences in a journalism (and citizenship) that emphasized the wisdom of an intellectual class expressed through newspapers based in essay form (for example, in France and colonial America), and one that emphasized facts (in the United States) with the democratic assumption that all citizens would compose their own conclusions.18
Reiterating this same view late in his career, and seeing the same dialectic between the news press and publics as Tarde did, Park wrote,

The first typical reaction of an individual to the news is likely to be a desire to repeat it to someone. This makes conversation, arouses further comment, and perhaps starts a discussion . . . discussion turns from the news to the issues it raises. The clash of opinions and sentiments which discussion inevitably evokes usually terminates in some sort of consensus or collective opinion—what we call public opinion. [. . .] [Public opinion] emerges from the discussions of individuals attempting to formulate and rationalize their individual interpretations of the news. Public opinion in this limited sense, is political opinion. 39

Park’s formulations of publics and crowds became the foundation of the field of collective behavior in American sociology. As we will see, it was the American newspaper establishment’s own view of their public role and was a view shared by other elites beyond academia. Walter Lippmann similarly claimed the centrality of the news and newspapers in the public sphere, emphasized their role as delivering information, and caustically criticized the tendencies of yellow journalism. He wrote,

The most destructive form of untruth is sophistry and propaganda by those whose profession is to report the news. The news columns are common carriers. When those who control them arrogate to themselves the right to determine, by their own consciences, what shall be reported and for what purpose, democracy is unworkable. Public opinion is blockaded. For, when a people can no longer confidently repair “to the best fountains for their information,” then anyone’s guess and anyone’s rumor, each man’s hopes and each man’s whim becomes the basis of government. 40

John Dewey’s concept of publics differed from these others in its emphasis on community rather than communication, and action rather than discussion. Dewey defined a public as a spontaneous group of people that arises as a result of the community being confronted by an issue, and who engage in discussion to reach a collective decision about the issue. He went beyond the formation of public opinion, to say that through such discussion, people arrive at a collective decision and act. Dewey’s emphasis on community as the basis of publics was incorporated into the mainstream of sociological thought. 41

The issue of action has made the distinction between crowds and publics more controversial and political. Ideas of crowds and of publics have focused on two
different practices valued differently by two different class cultures. The idea of 
publics is based on the dominant bourgeois norms of individualism and rationality 
of classic liberalism, with a nation of citizens each pursuing their own self-
interest, conversing, debating and deciding independently without regard to 
loyalties or obligations. The central concepts of debate imply individual inde-
pendence from the group. The idea of crowds is associated with working-class 
and other subordinate cultures, which, historically, have valued loyalty and 
solidarity above individuality. Debate is inimical to such solidarity; it may question 
leadership, create dissent, and paralyze or undermine group action. Thus the two 
concepts, publics and crowds, are interpretations from the point of view of two 
different class cultures.  

Action is likewise judged by these criteria. Debate is an exercise of the mind; 
action is one of the body. From the point of view of the dominant culture, action 
must be controlled by the mind and based on individual, rational decisions. The 
idea of publics is part of a dominant discourse that contains collective action by 
labeling it the disorder of bad crowds and contrasting it to good publics. Crowds 
were deemed irrational and thus antithetical to the Enlightenment project of 
democracy.  

Secondly, the discourse associated crowd irrationality with uncon-
trolled emotions and violence. Effectively, however, the objection is to force. The rowdiness of crowds 
constitutes forcible action rather than reasoned agreement. Publics presume a 
society of equals where various parties can reason with each other and achieve a 
consensus or settlement without resort to force. A public sphere is premised on 
the existence of a common ground not only physically but also socially and 
politically. 

This has created a conundrum for scholars using these two concepts. Once 
scholars began to accept crowds as rational and publics as acting, the distinctions 
between these two categories began to blur. In the 1970s, sociologists and 
historians began to reject crowd psychology and argue that crowds act rationally, 
and to merge crowds and the public protests and demonstrations of social 
movements into a broader category of collective action.  

Nevertheless, the scholarly work on crowds and on publics have remained separate, depending 
upon whether scholars emphasize the class and social issues of crowds or the 
political issues of publics. Scholars still disagree on whether the label of publics 
should be reserved for quiet deliberation or include raucous crowds as well. The 
result is that today some scholars describe an event as crowd action, while others 
call the same event a public in action. In cases of audiences, some see them as 
crowds, while others see them as vigorous publics. Rather than attempting an 
essentialist categorizing, we will treat these as competing discourses of con-
temporaries revealing contrary representations.
Mass man

Sociologist Herbert Blumer’s distinction of crowds, public and mass, separates mass from crowds through its diffuseness, and from publics through its lack of discussion. Media are a necessary component of mass as well as publics, the coordinating focus. But unlike publics, discussion and debate does not ensue among mass audiences as a response to the media. Instead of this intermediate step of gestation and deliberation, this concept presumed that media directly influence the mass to act or to remain inert, a kind of hypodermic theory of communication.

Mass as a twentieth-century concept grew out of the term, “the masses.” Raymond Williams traces a long history of English pejorative terms applied by elites to common folk, and notes that “the masses” was a term of contempt among elites. It replaced the eighteenth-century usage of mob [mobile vulgus] to refer to the lower classes, reserving mob for a particularly unruly crowd. This transition reveals the underlying long-standing relation between ideas of mass and crowd as well as between both and the lower orders. The idea, sometimes phrased as mass rather than masses, is first evident in the United States in the late eighteenth century. Alexander Hamilton wrote, “All communities divide themselves into the few and the many. The first are the rich and well born, the other are the mass of the people.” The masses continued to be used as a term into the twentieth century and applied to working-class movie audiences.

The modern concept of mass is revealed in the proliferation of the term as an adjective in mid-twentieth-century phrases such as mass market, mass media, mass communication, mass culture, mass society, mass man. While still alluding to the masses, it increasingly included the middle class as well as working and lower classes. But more centrally, it came to refer to a population of indistinguishable individuals, whose lives, action, and thinking are the same, who work at the same jobs in large corporations, and consume the same mass-produced products from the same national retailers and the same ideas from the same mass media. While the twentieth-century mass was dispersed, in other ways it resembled the crowd of crowd psychology, acting as one mind. Critics claimed that the mass media provided the demagogic stimulus to form this “one mind”: mass individuals consumed the same products and media messages and thus thought and acted the same. This mass acted as individuals rather than as a crowd, but individuals shorn of individuality. The negative evaluation of the mass focused not on the propensity for violence as with the crowd, but on the weakness of the individual will, the foundation of the market’s homo economicus and democracy’s informed citizenship. It was the difference in individuals that also distinguished the mass from publics. The concept of publics presumed strong and vital
individuals: knowledgeable, civic-minded, and with a strong moral sense. In mid-
twentieth century discourse, the mass individual was believed to exhibit none of
these.\textsuperscript{49}

The sociological reason that the mass was presumed to be vulnerable to media
began with the idea that mass individuals were not only indistinguishable, they
were believed to be unmoored by community. The community that Dewey
envisioned for publics was presumed absent in this mass society. Community was
defined in terms of relationships, a network of relations among people who know
and interact with each other face to face without mediation. Mass society critics
feared the disappearance of such relationships. They expressed concern that places
of public sociability, such as the neighborhood bar, hair salon and general store,
were disappearing due to suburbanization, home media and shopping malls. They
claimed mass marketing and mass media had replaced community relationships
with anonymous ones. These ideas were the modern expression of the founda-
tional concern of social sciences since the late nineteenth century, a concern
about the loss of community in the transition from traditional agricultural to
modern industrial society in the United States and Europe.\textsuperscript{50}

Underlying this analysis was a presumption of the disappearance of the public
conversation or discussion that was the basis of publics. The traditional public
places were imagined as sites of community, important not only for sociability
but also for the conversation of publics, that is, for civic participation. Before the
twentieth century and the rise of opinion polling, the term public opinion meant
a group consensus, implicitly derived from discussion. A good many articles
appeared in American magazines in the late nineteenth century on the power of
public opinion, formulated as consensus arising from public discussion. This
appears to have been part of the Progressive reaction against party politics. An
1889 article in the Harvard Monthly stated it succinctly, “We are ever exposed to
two dangers: to a grasping plutocracy, wielding huge corporate powers . . . and
on the other hand, to the ignorant voters—the unfit kings—led by shameless
political adventurers.” It emphasized that public opinion was a powerful political
force influencing government policy and action, yet it was fickle, changing and
not particularly rational or well considered. The editor of The Nation, E. L.
Godkin’s definition of public opinion was a “consensus of opinion, among large
bodies of persons, which acts as a political force, imposing on those in authority
certain enactments, or certain lines of policy.” It is expressed through elections
and through journalism. These articles consistently described a distinction
between the ideal of public opinion based upon rational discussion leading to
consensus, and actual public opinion exhibited by the mass and based more on
sentiment and prejudice, but nevertheless influencing policy.\textsuperscript{51}
With the arrival and growth of polling an individualized concept of public opinion arose, defined as the sum of individual opinions without the element of discussion. The older ideal of opinion based on rational discussion faded from the discourse, and the opinion of the mass was now encapsulated in statistical summaries. Herbert Blumer’s was perhaps the first in a tradition of critiques of such opinion polling. As John Durham Peters, phrased it, “What we call public opinion today is thus actually non-public opinion.”

The psychological mechanism proposed for direct influence on the mass was suggestion, adopted from crowd psychology. The substitute for community was mass media, defining mass man as an audience of dispersed, isolated individuals, vulnerable to suggestion from media messages. Even after these theories of mass society began to fade, the image of the solitary, isolated individual, vulnerable to media, remained through the twentieth century.

The chapters
The organization of the book is framed around the historical progression of the three concepts of crowd, public, and mass of isolated individuals, in concert with ideas of citizenship and audiences. Chapter 1 examines the changes in conception of nineteenth-century theater audiences from acceptable rowdiness into dangerous mobs, the latter theorized in late nineteenth-century crowd psychology. At times, working-class auditors represented themselves in terms of publics, while others characterized them as unruly and undesirable crowds. Chapter 2 continues the story in early twentieth-century movie houses, as crowd psychology was adapted to discussions of mass vulnerability. Audiences were reconceived as suggestible masses under the influence of powerful media, first movies and then radio. The experience of propaganda in World War I and the growth of national advertising in the 1920s contributed to this conception of the masses as suggestible audiences.

Chapter 3 returns to the nineteenth century and the development of the conception of publics. In mid-century the new middle class withdrew from the public sphere typified by working-class roughness and partisan politics, concentrating instead on liberal individualism, self-cultivation, and the private sphere. Late in the century, Progressivism reinvigorated the idea of civic participation. Middle-class reformers proselytized among working-class immigrants to Americanize them. Civic pageantry and political theater treated performance as political communication and audiences as citizens. Chapter 4 follows the transfer of the idea of publics from the press to broadcasting. Debate among government, educators and reformers, and commercial broadcasters produced a discursive field that framed the airwaves as a public sphere, with each party advocating their
own versions of broadcasting as a public sphere. Even advertisers positioned
themselves and their audiences as citizens.

Chapter 5 explores mid-century intellectuals’ preoccupation with mass
culture, mass society, and mass media. Aesthetic and social criticism targeted the
post-war middle class as a mass of identical, isolated individuals and blamed
television as the medium that programmed their lives. Chapter 6 examines the
rise of a communication research paradigm that paralleled this public debate and
similarly constructed audiences as solitary individuals. Chapter 7 continues with
more recent, popular characterizations of audiences as pathological individuals,
incapable of fulfilling their role as citizen. The Epilogue takes a brief look at recent
discourses on audiences for live entertainments and for the internet.