WISER paper

Racialised Publics: Coloniality, Technology and Imaginaries

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The notion of the 'public sphere' remains one of the key concepts in the field of media and communications studies. The book that coined the term, Jürgen Habermas' "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society", can be considered as one of the most frequently cited and canonical texts of our field. Habermas linked the public sphere that emerged in 17th and 18th century Europe to the emergence of capitalism and democracy but neglected to discuss how these strongly relied on slavery, slave trade and colonialism. Racialised publics refer to both the infrastructures that have constituted such spaces historically as well as the discourses that have circulated through the spaces enabled by the infrastructures.

Social media are often seen as inaugurating transnational encounters and spaces of conversation as well as new forms of global racial consciousness. This interest in change —in understanding what 'difference' the digital makes— characterises much of the scholarship on digital media. However, given the long histories of genocide, slavery and colonialism, racialised publics have always been shaped by the circulation of texts, discourses, technologies and infrastructures across national borders. In contrast to chasing the latest, this presentation makes a case in favour of slowing down in order to address the short memory of digital media studies. Hence, it considers digital publics as part of much longer histories of change but also continuity. A question less frequently asked is what remains the same and which media forms persist.

Empirically, I interrogate these questions in the context of Southern Africa, and Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa in particular, where I have lived, worked and researched during different periods in the past 25 years. I reflect on how examining the history of racialised publics from Southern Africa might help us shed light on processes of racialisation elsewhere. In this presentation, I discuss the three key arguments that are part of my current book project on this topic: (1) the racialised nature of conceptualising publics; (2) the colonial infrastructuring of racialised publics; and (3) the transnational nature of racialised publics.

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In this short paper, I provide an overview of my current book project on racialised publics. I invoke the concept of racialised publics to refer to both the infrastructures that have constituted such spaces historically as well as the discourses that have circulated through the spaces enabled by the infrastructures. Racialisation refers to "the process through which structural and ideological forces of race making and maintenance occurs".[1] The concept of racialisation encompasses the changes and continuities brought by genocide, slavery and colonialism which intersect and continue to shape the present. Like the concept of coloniality, racialisation points to the *long durée*. Racialisation is frequently about the identification and categorisation of 'racial others', which was essential to the justification of genocide, slavery and colonialism. However, it can also refer to processes that are part of progressive, emancipatory struggles that invoke racial identities in order to mobilise, liberate or resist white supremacy.

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[1] Murji 2004, p. 40.

Racialised publics cannot be simply understood as emerging from within national borders. Given the long histories of genocide, slavery and colonialism, racialised publics have always been shaped by the circulation of texts, discourses, technologies and infrastructures across these borders. Social media are often seen as inaugurating transnational encounters and spaces of conversation as well as new forms of global racial consciousness. This interest in change —in understanding what 'difference' the digital makes— characterises much of the scholarship on digital media. The desire to identify 'the new', to be 'the first' and to examine 'the latest' is also central to the competitive urge of the neoliberal academy, just as it drove the colonial conquest. In contrast to chasing the latest, this book makes a case in favour of *slowing down* in order to address the short memory of digital media studies. Hence, it considers digital publics as part of much longer histories of change but also continuity. A question less frequently asked is what remains the same and which media forms persist.

The book examines the history of conceptualising and infrastructuring racialised publics as well as the role of racialised publics in critiquing histories of genocide, slavery and colonialism. Racialised publics are shaped by longer histories but in turn also intervene in these histories at different points in time, proposing alternative imaginaries of possible worlds. Media technologies such as the telegraph, newspaper, radio, television and the internet help to constitute and infrastructure publics but are also intricately linked to processes of racialisation. Colonial administrators imagined publics in racialised ways and identified certain media technologies as suitable or desirable for particular racialised populations. The book argues that media technologies were, and continue to be, deeply implicated in racial categorisation and segregation.

Despite the violent ways in which a range of technologies have been implicated in processes of racialisation, technology continues to inspire hopes for a better future. Socio-technical imaginaries help to anticipated these eagerly better futures and relate them to the colonial past and present. The public circulation of these imaginaries about technology again is shaped by longer processes of racialisation, which makes certain imaginaries more visible than others. In the book, I examine both elite and popular socio-technical imaginaries, ranging from policy discourses on the Fourth Industrial Revolution and artificial intelligence to popular songs about mobile phones and social change.

Empirically, the book interrogates these questions in the context of Southern Africa, and Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa in particular, where I have lived, worked and researched during different periods in the past 25 years. South Africa features most strongly in the book for a number of reasons. First of all, because of its longer history of racialisation and secondly, because of the way it has shaped and was shaped by Zambia and Zimbabwe politically, culturally and socially. We can think here of longer histories of labour migration from Zambia and Zimbabwe to South Africa's mines as well as white settlers leaving South Africa for Zambia and Zimbabwe. We can also think of their entangled histories through the so-called 'frontline states' (which included Zambia and Zimbabwe) and their support of the struggle against Apartheid. But more importantly for the purpose of this book is South Africa's role in shaping Zambia's and Zimbabwe's media landscapes. Cecil John Rhodes was a central figure here with his investment in extending a telegraph cable network and Argus Printing and Publishing Company into the region, which shaped both media infrastructures and the nature of media discourses circulating in the region.

South Africa also in many ways echoes, if not represents, the world at large. As Steve Biko argued, "South Africa is but a microcosm of the global confrontation between the Third World and the rich nations of the world".[2] Similarly, Samir Amin saw South Africa "as a sort of microcosm of the world capitalist system, combining on the same territory the specific characteristics of each of the four

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[2] Biko, p. 72.

'worlds' of the world system".[3] The notion of Apartheid does not just refer to South Africa's inauguration of an era of racial spatial segregation in 1948 but the concept has obtained meaning beyond South Africa. In 1973, as part of the International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid (ICSPCA), the General Assembly of the United Nations agreed on a legal definition of Apartheid which equated it to racially based policies in any state and declared it a crime against humanity. In its occupation of Palestine, Israel has often been equated with Apartheid South Africa in adopting similar strategies of racial segregation. More recently, the term 'global Apartheid' has been invoked by a number of scholars to refer to the way in which "the global north has been engaged in projects of racialization, segregation, political intervention, mobility controls, capitalist plunder, and labor exploitation of people in the global south".[4] In this book, I reflect on what examining the history of racialised publics from South Africa might help us shed light on processes of racialisation elsewhere.

The following sections give a brief overview of three key arguments in the book: (1) the racialised nature of conceptualising publics; (2) the colonial infrastructuring of racialised publics; and (3) the transnational nature of racialised publics.

The racialised nature of conceptualising publics
The notion of the 'public sphere' is one of the key concepts in the field of media and communications studies. The book that coined the term, Jürgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (published in German in 1962 and translated into English in 1989), could be considered as one of the most frequently cited and canonical texts of our field. Habermas' notion of the public sphere has inspired a range of scholars who have found it useful as a normative ideal that can be applied to make sense of, and assess, the role of the spaces of deliberation brought into being by modern mass media such as television, radio, print media[5], and more recently digital and social media.[6] However, of course, it is also one of the most intensely debated texts, with critics highlighting the way in which Habermas' public sphere excluded women[7] or working-class people[8], doubting his belief in a unitary public sphere[9] or questioning his focus on rational-critical debate and neglect of the role of emotion.[10] Arguably, even the critiques of this 'essentially contested concept' have become canonized.[11]

Referring to the period between 1680 and 1730, Jürgen Habermas identified both newspapers and coffee houses in Britain as key 'social structures' of what he coined the 'public sphere'. These were intricately linked to each other: "[t]he periodical articles were not only made the object of discussion by the public of the coffee houses but were viewed as integral parts of the discussion".[12] Newspapers and periodicals reported on the discussions and deliberations in the coffee houses and in turn were also circulated through the coffee houses. For Habermas, the notion referred to of "a sphere where private people come together as public and discuss matters of common concern".[13] In his book, he offered a historical account of the emergence of this space in eighteenth-century

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[3] Amin 2019, p. 175.
[4] Besteman 2019, p. S28.
[5] See Dahlgren 1995; Lunt and Livingstone 2002; Butsch 2007.
[6] See Papacharissi 2002; Dahlgren 2005; Benkler 2006.
[7] Fraser 1992.
[8] Negt and Kluge 1972.
[9] Gitlin 1998.
[10] Mouffe 2000.
[11] See Rauchfleisch 2017. Lesser-known critiques have addressed the Eurocentric nature of Habermas' account of the public sphere, and its inapplicability outside the context of Western Europe. See for example Baker 1994, Gunaratne 2006, Min 2009, Min 2014, Dalleo 2011, De Sousa Santos 2012.
[12] Habermas 1991, p. 42.
[13] Habermas, 1991, p. 27.

England, Germany and France which according to him coincided with 'a new phase of capitalism'. Since the 1989 publication of the English translation of his book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (which was originally written in German), Habermas' concept of the public sphere has been elevated as normative ideal of what constitutes a 'good' liberal democracy. It is often presented as one of the prime achievements of European liberal modernity.

And yet, what is left undiscussed in the book is 'the darker side of modernity'[14], the way in which the transatlantic slave trade and slavery shaped and enabled the 'social structures' of the public sphere that he describes. This part of history is completely absent from Habermas' account of eighteenth-century Europe and only euphemistically described through notions such as 'mercantilism' and 'long-distance trade'. For the new commercial elites and predominantly white bourgeois Londoners, Virginia Coffee House and Jamaica Coffee House were spaces to deliberate, network and discuss 'trade' — whether in commodities or people. But for Black Londoners, these represented the auction houses where their bodies were on sale like private property or the temporary carceral space where they would be 'delivered' to if caught escaping enslaved conditions before being returned to their owners. Re-reading Habermas in the context of slavery and the slave trade exposes the contradictory and ambiguous nature of modern liberalism conveyed by European political philosophy. As Lisa Lowe has argued, this form of liberalism "civilizes and develops freedoms for 'man' in modern Europe and North America, while relegating others to geographical and temporal spaces that are constituted as backward, uncivilized, and unfree".[15] While the exclusionary nature of Habermas' bourgeois public sphere has frequently been critiqued in relation to gender and class, the racialised nature has received surprisingly little attention.[16]

What the re-reading above also reveals is that the space that Habermas described cannot be understood simply as the pinnacle of *European* civilisation and achievement. While the public sphere may have been presented by Habermas as the early evidence of the 'democratic progress' of European nation-states, it is clear that early eighteenth-century coffee houses had multiple transnational links which enabled their emergence. Hence, it is a space that transcends Europe and the 'social structures' that Habermas describes were connected to larger territories. London's coffee houses would not have existed without the unfreedom of Black bodies who literally fuelled this sphere through their labour on Caribbean sugar plantations. Sugar did not only sustain coffeehouse culture but also powered deals struck between slave traders and kept visitors sufficiently energised to 'deliberate'. It is also a space that was deeply implicated in the colonial conquest that followed in the nineteenth century as part of the consolidation of British colonial rule in the wake of the passing of the Slavery Abolition Act which abolished slavery on 1 August 1834. Habermas was primarily interested to make sense of the European bourgeois public sphere through the lens of capitalism and democratisation. Instead, this book examines publics as shaped by longer histories of racialisation as well as liberation.

Apart from taking into account processes of racialisation in our conceptualisation of publics, we also need to acknowledge that the way in which publics have been conceptualised has further reinforced racialisation. The emergence of publics is strongly associated with the emergence of European liberal modernity, print capitalism and literacy, and therefore frequently is equated with whiteness. This somehow suggests that publics are the privy of white Europeans. As Appadurai and Breckenridge have suggested, it is important to liberate the concept of publics from its European historical baggage:

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[14] Mignolo 2011.

[15] Lowe 2015, p. 3.

[16] Whilst Habermas' bourgeois public sphere has rarely been referred to as an explicitly white space, scholars such as Houston Baker Jr (in a special 1995 issue of *Public Culture* on the Black public sphere) have argued that black Americans were excluded from the space that Habermas described.

> […] to loosen the link between the word public and the history of civil society in Europe, and to agree that it be used to refer to a set of arenas that have emerged in a variety of historical conditions and that articulate the space between domestic life and the projects of the nation-state – where different social groups (classes, ethnic groups, genders) constitute their identities by their experience of mass-mediated forms in relation to the practices of everyday life. Public in this usage ceases to have any necessary or predetermined relationship to formal politics, rational communicative action, print capitalism or the dynamics of the emergence of a literate bourgeoisie. Thus the term becomes emancipated from any specific EuroAmerican master narrative and indicates an arena of cultural contestation in which modernity can become a diversely appropriated experience.[17]

This enables a more pluriversal exploration of publics *anywhere* without automatically assuming that the emergence of publics was tied to the rise of print technology or the emergence of capitalism and democracy.

The colonial infrastructuring of racialised publics
As Michael Warner has argued, publics are not only shaped by the texts that they circulate but also by "the means of production and distribution, the physical textual objects themselves, the social conditions of access to them".[18] Publics need infrastructures for the circulation of texts to occur. Colonialism required transnational communication infrastructures in order to effectively link the motherland to its colonies. The colonial public sphere is often studied through the lens of print culture with literary scholars examining texts and discourses in detail.[19] Instead, this chapter adopts an infrastructural approach to the emergence of colonial publics in order to reveal continuities over time and to better understand contemporary digital publics.

Existing work on colonial infrastructures has often focused on large-scale infrastructure projects such as the Cape-to-Cairo railway line that Cecil Rhodes hoped would connect different parts of the African continent or the Kariba Dam project which materialised in the 1950s at the border of Northern and Southern Rhodesia (now Zambia and Zimbabwe).[20] It has also emphasised the relevance of colonial infrastructures in the present which continue to facilitate the extraction of raw material and mineral resources from the African continent. The 'coloniality of infrastructure' is evidenced for example by "pipes in the Mediterranean Sea [which] continue to bring African gas to Europe, and many private extraction industries which were born under colonialism [and] are still nurtured by former colonial powers and live on today".[21] Hence, a key defining feature of colonial infrastructures was their transnational nature, often connecting Africa to Europe.

Apart from railways, pipes and other forms of extractive infrastructures, media technologies such as radio, film and television were a crucial part of colonial infrastructures. As Brian Larkin has argued in relation to the Nigerian context, media technologies should be treated "as part of the wider infrastructural project of colonial and postcolonial urbanism". As he demonstrates in his work, "[m]edia technologies were introduced to Nigeria by colonial regimes as part of an attempt to shape political subjects and create modern, urban Africans". In this book, I understand media infrastructures not primarily within the context of urbanism but I treat these as part of wider extractive infrastructures associated with mining and exploitation of labour.

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[17] Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995, p. 4-5.
[18] Warner 2002.
[19] Hunter and James 2020.
[20] Storey 2015, Tischler 2014.
[21] Cupers 2021.

Larkin's call echoes the more recent conceptual turn to infrastructures in media and communication studies which has highlighted different types of infrastructure such as 'communication infrastructures', 'media infrastructures', 'internet infrastructures', 'platform infrastructures' and 'data infrastructures'.[22] Within this turn, scholars have both examined media and communication as infrastructures in their own right or have investigated their relation to other forms of infrastructure such as electricity or water provision.

Like the colonial infrastructures mentioned above (railways, dams, pipes), media infrastructures are deeply imbricated in global constellations of power. As Parks and Sarosielski point out, "infrastructures emerge in relation to conditions of difference and unevenness, they are fraught within relationships of power".[23] Furthermore, "infrastructures are critical dimensions of state power and territoriality, and as such they function in ways that divide and disconnect".[24] It is important to better understand the historical conditions in which infrastructures emerge as well as the way in which they connect and disconnect populations. An important aim of colonialism in Southern Africa was to create separate infrastructures for different racialised populations.[25] Whilst the physical segregation that this produced has been well-documented, it is important to examine the mediated dimension of Apartheid, literally "separateness" and reflect on how it can shed light on contemporary digital publics.

Hence, colonialism produced infrastructures that are not only transnational but also racialised. Junaid Rana uses the concept of racial infrastructure to refer to "a spatial formation in which the social, political, and economic relationships of racial systems operate through dominance and discursive power".[26] Space here could be physical but could also refer to mediated spaces such as publics. Whilst the noun of infrastructures has a static connotation, the verb of infrastructuring is better able to convey the historical process in which publics were racialised through a combination of policy interventions and discursive constructions. As Korn et al have argued, "[b]y shifting the focus to *infrastructuring*, infrastructures are viewed as practical achievements of various actors. Infrastructures are not simply in existence, but they are built, installed, maintained, repaired, used, worked around/against, appropriated and so on".[27]

Whilst bodies of literature on infrastructures and publics have been relatively separate, recent work has sought to link both in order to demonstrate how infrastructures enable publics but also shape them in particular ways.[28]Building on this work, my interest here is in examining how the shaping of publics ties in with processes of racialisation. Ultimately, adopting a historical perspective to the infrastructuring of publics helps me to demonstrate that "publics and public media do not simply exist, but have to be permanently made and remade".[29] Frequently, publics are understood in relation to specific media (radio publics, television publics, hashtag publics etc) or are made sense of through spatial metaphors such as Habermas' coffee house. However, Warner's understanding of publics refers more specifically to the circulation of a corpus of texts, with circulation not predetermined to occur through any specific medium.

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[22] On the turn, see Hesmondhalgh 2021. On the types of infrastructures, see Kim and Ball-Rokeach 2006, Parks and Sarosielski 2015, Sandvig 2013, Plantin, Lagoze, Edwards and Sandvig 2018 and Brodie 2023.
[23] Parks and Sarosielski 2015, p. 11
[24] Parks and Sarosielski 2015, p. 20.
[25] Von Schnitzler, p. 13.
[26] Rana 2016). The racial infrastructure of the terror-industrial complex. *Social Text* 34(4), p. 113
[27] Korn et al 2019, p. 17.
[28] Korn et al 2019; Kristensen and Sorensen.
[29] Korn et al 2019, p. 22.

As discussed in the previous section, Habermas' European bourgeois public sphere heavily relied on racialised processes of resource extraction and labour exploitation during the period of slavery. In the late nineteenth century, it began to extend its reach through new infrastructures such as telegraph networks. While the eighteenth century saw the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere in Britain, the nineteenth century saw the circulation of liberal ideas connected to this sphere enshrined in legislation circulating through different colonised parts of the British Empire. This is when colonial regimes began to shape what could be said by whom in colonised territories, as part of attempts to forge cohesion and connect white settlers across the British Empire whilst clamping down on any dissent from Black colonial subjects. Media technologies were carefully introduced by colonial regimes in attempts to manage the agency of Black publics. The white bourgeois public sphere, in effect, was extended from the motherland to the colony. In the early twentieth century, these colonial publics were reinforced through the opportunities offered by new media technologies such as radio and cinema.

The emergence of white settler colonialism in the nineteenth century created a bifurcated state which separated white settler citizens from Black native subjects. As Mahmood Mamdani argued in his 1995 book *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, this bifurcated state divided populations into citizens, i.e. white settlers who enjoyed full civil and political rights, and Black subjects who were denied these rights.[30] The public sphere that colonial administrators attempted to create was exclusionary despite being couched in "the language of universality".[31] It mainly addressed white settlers and did not envisage a Black readership at the time.

Twenty years before Mamdani published his seminal book, Peter Ekeh also acknowledged the bifurcated nature of publics in Africa. His seminal article 'Colonialism and the two publics in Africa: a theoretical statement' was published in 1975, and provides an important account of the constitution of public life in Africa, and Nigeria more specifically.[32] Ekeh recognised that the colonial state had not been able to capture public life in its entirety which resulted in the emergence of two publics: the civic public which was "historically associated with the colonial administration" and what he —somewhat problematically of course— referred to as 'the primordial public' which was the space in which "primordial groupings, ties, and sentiments influence and determine the individual's public behaviour".[33]

Both Mamdani and Ekeh's conceptualisations are helpful in considering the colonial infrastructuring of racialised bifurcated publics. As Dhyana Ziegler and Molefi K. Asante have pointed out, "[i]t would be a mistake to assume that media philosophies of most of Africa are founded only upon the colonial experience".[34] As they add, "[t]o appreciate the nature of the press and broadcasting in Africa, it is necessary to remember that Africans were communicating long before Europeans entered the continent; indeed, long before Arabs came to the northern part of the continent, Africans had established forms of communication".[35] Frank Ugboajah coined the concept of 'oramedia' to refer to folk media based on 'indigenous' culture produced and consumed by members of a certain group.[36] For Ugboajah, 'oramedia' were the prime disseminators of culture in Africa.

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[30] Mamdani 1996.
[31] McKenzie 1999.
[32] Ekeh 1975.
[33] Ekeh 1975, p. 92.
[34] Ziegler and Asante 1992, p. 3.
[35] Ziegler and Asante 1992, p. 3.
[36] See Ugboajah 1985.

Despite the pervasive impact of colonialism, oral communication, through poetry and songs, has persisted as a powerful form of communication, constituting publics that were crucial in struggles of liberation. These publics invoked racialised identities to generate racial consciousness, to mobilise and draw strength and support whilst countering the system and policies of racial segregation.[37]

Oral forms of communication did not always remain as such but were often also documented and converted into written texts. For Black journalists and writers such as Sol Plaatje, writing was also "a commitment to teaching and developing the [Setswana] language, and to preserving history, the oral tradition, and the Setswana language itself from extinction".[38] Similarly, liberation songs were not only passed on orally but these also circulated through new media such as guerilla radio stations.[39]

Examining the role of orality in enabling publics also challenges the assumptions many scholars have made about the so-called 'public sphere'. First of all, the bourgeois public sphere has often been equated with literacy and written texts, which have been associated with modernity and development, leaving anything unwritten associated with the lack of both. This again points to the racialised nature of conceptualising publics, or more broadly to what Rezek refers to as 'the racialisation of print'.[40] This has led scholars to ignore or not value public modes of circulation beyond the written word. Furthermore, orality is often treated as inferior and premodern, ready to be replaced with literacy and written texts as part of processes of modernisation.

However, as I demonstrate in the book, orality persist and co-exists with many other media technologies – from newspapers to radio to YouTube where a range of old and new liberation songs are circulating, again to listeners in and beyond South Africa. Moreover, orality has been a highly effective means of communication and of convening publics, defying white elites during Apartheid and new Black elites in the post-Apartheid period.

The transnational nature of racialised publics
As indicated at the beginning of this paper, Habermas' book has received substantial critiques for ignoring gender and class, for assuming a unitary public sphere and for not taking into account dissensus and emotion in public debate. Another set of scholars critiqued the applicability of his concept in other contexts. For example, Houston A. Baker Jr. pointed out that "[i]nsofar as the emergence and energy of Habermas's public sphere were generated by property ownership and literacy, how can black Americans, who like many others have traditionally been excluded from these domains of modernity, endorse Habermas's beautiful idea?".[41] Similarly, Raphael Dalleo argued that because of the history of slavery and colonialism, "the Caribbean public sphere could not possibly develop as the bourgeois public sphere Habermas describes arising in Europe".[42]

However, whilst Habermas' concept may indeed not *apply* very well to these different contexts, the European bourgeois public sphere that he described was profoundly entangled with the contexts that Baker Jr. and Dalleo examined. If European liberalism was the other side of the coin of American and Caribbean slavery, they clearly cannot be understood without each other. Hence, Habermas' eighteenth-century European bourgeois public sphere should be treated as a profoundly transnational space. It was enabled and connected to other parts of the world

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[37] Gunner 2019.
[38] Matjila and Haire 2015, p. 46-47, cited in Salawu 2023, p. 9.
[39] See Lekgoathi 2013.
[40] Rezek 2020.
[41] Baker Jr. 1994, p. 9.
[42] Dalleo 2011, p. 2.

because of its embeddedness in slavery and the slave trade, and it set the stage for the formation of the colonial public sphere across the British Empire after the abolition of slavery.

In recent years, research on the public sphere has increasingly centred technology in making sense of transformations. This has resulted into two new conceptualisations, with the first one highlighting the transnational or global features of digital publics and the second one drawing attention to the technological affordances of digital technology and social media in constituting publics.

The first body of work introduced concepts such as 'the global public sphere'[43], 'the transnational public sphere'[44] and 'the international public sphere'[45]. Their aim was to re-assess whether Habermas' notion of the public sphere was "relevant in an age of globalization, when the transnational flows of people and information have become increasingly intensive and when the nation-state can no longer be taken granted as the natural frame for social and political debate".[46] They asked whether the emergence of new communication technologies such as satellite television, the Internet and social media resulted in a new process of 'structural transformation'. What these approaches failed to acknowledge is that the public sphere that Habermas described in his book already was a space that was produced transnationally.

The body of scholarship on the global or transnational public sphere assumes a transition from 'national publics' to 'transnational publics' largely catalysed by new communication technologies. Given the connections between European colonial powers and their colonies, and vice versa, this transition is a false one. As Kimberly Hutchings has argued, these scholars have adopted "a Westphalian sovereignty phase as norm, which is then undermined by globalization. On reflection, however, this does not correspond to the experience of most states, civil societies, or public spheres. For most states, for example, global neoliberalism is simply the latest in a long line of ways in which domestic policy is externally constrained".[47] Ultimately, this points to the connections, intimacies and entanglements that long predate the emergence of new technologies in the late twentieth century. It also demonstrates that an examination of publics through the lens of evolving technological affordances is insufficient. Instead, what is needed is a historicised understanding of the transnational racialised publics.

The second body of scholarship emerges in the context of the rise of social network sites and social media platforms in the late 2000s which provides yet again a reason to retheorise publics and leads to notions such as 'networked publics' and 'socially mediated publicness'.[48] Focusing on the affordances of these new technologies, dana boyd identified four key features of the 'networked publics' enabled by social media: persistence ('online expressions are automatically recorded and archived'), replicability ('content made out of bits can be duplicated'), scalability ('the potential visibility of content in networked publics is great'), and searchability ('content in networked publics can be accessed through search').[49] The liberating potential of social media was emphasized in early studies in relation to a number of world events, such as the role of Twitter in post-election protests in Iran in June 2009.[50] Of course most prominently, the role of social media in enabling and

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[43] Volkmer 2014; Sparks 2000; Castells 2008.
[44] Fraser and Nash 2014.
[45] Calhoun 2004.
[46] Fraser and Nash 2014.
[47] Hutchings 2014, p. 102.
[48] Benkler 2006, Varnelis 2008, boyd 2010, Baym and boyd 2012.
[49] boyd 2010, p. 46.
[50] Sreberny and Khiabany 2010, Khiabany 2012.

facilitating protests reached its peak moment during the so-called 'Arab Spring' in North Africa in early 2011, which was often popularly described as a 'Facebook revolution'.[51]

The emergence of digital technology challenged the idea of "the traditional, society-wide public sphere" and instead produced "a wide variety of new, conceptually localized public spheres" which focused on "specific topics which are of interest to their particular constituencies of users and participants".[52] This gave rise to the idea of 'issue publics' which revolve around certain shared areas of interest. For others, issues were always central to the emergence of publics —as captured by Noortje Marres' 'no issue no public' catchphrase—, and not necessarily related to the rise of new technologies.[53] Hashtags are key to shaping the nature and composition of issue publics, or what some have referred to as 'hashtag publics'.[54] Twitter hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo have brought together conversations that have exposed and critiqued police violence, racism and sexual harassment.

Initially, scholars understood hashtag publics as fairly spontaneous, self-organised phenomena, as conveyed by the notion of 'ad hoc public', but increasingly, there has been an emphasis on the way in which non-human actors such as algorithms shape the nature of publics.[55] Concepts such as 'calculated publics'[56] and 'engineered publics'[57] dispel with conceptualisations of publics as spontaneous forms of assembly and refer to the way in which algorithms produce carefully choreographed and highly personalized timelines. As Zeynep Tufekci argued, "[d]igital technologies have given rise to a new combination of big data and computational practices which allow for massive, latent data collection and sophisticated computational modeling, increasing the capacity of those with resources and access to use these tools to carry out highly effective, opaque and unaccountable campaigns of persuasion and social engineering in political, civic and commercial spheres".

The changing business models of digital platforms play an important role in the shift from the fairly neutral idea of 'networked publics' to the much stronger metaphor of 'engineered publics'. Of course, more generally, platforms have increasingly been seen as key actors in controlling and shaping the nature of what has become known as 'the platformised internet'.[58] The implications of the skewed power relations that produce algorithmically shaped and datafied publics was most powerfully demonstrated in Facebook's Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2018, which exposed how the company deployed big data extraction and psychological profiling from users in the hope to influence them more effectively in their choices in a range of election campaigns across the world. What emerges is the idea of computational propaganda increasingly shaping 'a manipulated public', which is subject to a range of filtering processes and active disinformation campaigns executed by 'armies of trolls' and 'bots' - networks of humans and non-humans.[59] Furthermore, algorithms and datafication have contributed to a growing segmentation and fragmentation of publics.[60] Automated processes produce publics which are organised around issues of common interest (popularly also described as 'echo chambers'), or brought together as a result of individual profiling.

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[51] Howard and Hussain 2013, Markham 2014, Herrera 2014.
[52] Bruns 2008, p. 68.
[53] Marres 2005.
[54] Rambukkana 2015.
[55] Bruns and Burgess 2015, pp. 13-27.
[56] Gillespie 2014.
[57] Tufekci 2014.
[58] Helmond 2015.
[59] Bennett and Livingston 2018, Ong and Cabañes 2019, Woolley and Howard 2016.
[60] Holtzhausen 2016.

Apart from algorithms and platforms, big data have implications for our understanding of publics and a number of scholars have in recent attempted to theorise the link between big data and publics, emphasising not only control but also highlighting opportunities for agency. The notion of 'datafied publics' reflects the way in which big data are increasingly deployed to map, trace and 'know' publics, frequently in order to influence them more effectively, whether to support a certain politician or political party or to buy a particular project.[61]

This review of the literature on digital publics in the last two decades demonstrates how scholars have been fascinated with 'the new' and how a range of technologies have changed 'the public sphere', demanding new conceptualisations of the way in which we understand 'publics' and 'publicness'. However, the focus on technological affordances in recent debates on publics has resulted into a linear, stage-ist, ahistorical characterisation of publics which ignores both the continuing importance of older technologies and the convergence between old and new forms of technology.[62] It has resulted in a short memory perspective which has often accorded too much primacy to the role of technology in shaping publics at the expense of other determinants. Adopting a *long durée* perspective through the lens of racialisation and coloniality makes visible the continuities across time.

Somewhat ironically, Habermas shared this interest in the *long durée*, as reflected in the title of his book: 'the structural transformation of the public sphere'. For Habermas, the shift from feudalism to capitalism was crucial in the production of a new space where issues of public concern could be discussed away from the authority of the state and unfettered by economic interests. However, as we have seen, Habermas ignored the role of slavery and colonialism in his understanding of the *long durée*, which this book will centre in its account of racialised publics.

In this section of the book, I will adopt a historicised approach to the transnational nature of racialised publics through three cases. The first case examines the emergence of a global racial consciousness, focusing specifically on Marcus Garvey's *Negro World* newspaper and #BlackLivesMatter protests in 2020. It offers a comparative media history across time, pointing to continuities and changes. The second case situates transnational digital publics within longer histories of anti-colonial media resistance, zooming in on the #zvirikufaya viral phenomenon in 2014 which brought home-based and diasporic Zimbabweans into conversations. It provides a genealogical approach that emphasises the importance of making sense of digital publics within a longer historical context. The third case examines the growing visibility of colonial history and memory in transnational digital publics, forging not only new solidarities but also highlighting entangled, shared histories. This case engages with digital public history and growing articulations of a 'history of the present' online. It focuses on three specific techniques of visibility: (1) monuments as undesirable remnants of the past in the present; (2) contemporary police violence as a continuation of the past; and (3) past genocides in relation to recent genocides.

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[61] Møller Hartley, Bengtsson, Schjøtt Hansen and Sivertsen 2021.
[62] Shome 2019.

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