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Marketing Logics and the Politics of Public Spheres: On Discursive Engineering and Enclosure

Scholarship on publics has proliferated during the past two decades, especially in linguistic anthropology. Drawing on Michael Warner's famous formulation, publics are now routinely theorized as a social form predicated on the reflexive circulation of discourse. This article, however, identifies a tension within Warner's conception of publics. On the one hand, Warner levels a critique of liberal publicity, noting its exclusions and contradictions, but on the other hand, he models his own account of publics on the liberal public sphere and assumptions of voluntaristic, free speech. Working from ethnographic research on a government-sponsored nation-branding project undertaken in Macedonia, the article develops a different perspective on publics and their politics. It examines how practices of marketing and strategic communication now pervade public spheres and valorize not voluntaristic participation but discursive engineering, that is, concerted efforts to determine how discourse can and will circulate in some public. When tethered to projects of centralized political control, as happened in Macedonia during Nikola Gruevski's prime ministership (2006-2016), practices of discursive engineering can result in enclosed public spheres. Ultimately, the article asks, what can attention to elite efforts to engineer and enclose public spheres teach about struggles over participation in contemporary contexts of mass publicity? [circulation, discursive engineering, marketing, participation, publics]

We live in a world of anxious publics. Concerns and debates over disinformation, fake news, cancel culture, political correctness and free speech now lie at the center of political discussion in many world contexts. These issues, in essence, each reflect worries about what should be able to circulate in a public, who should be able to decide this, and who publics claim to represent.¹ For example, French President Emmanuel Macron can allege that "Certain social science theories entirely imported from the United States," threaten French republicanism (Onishi 2021), thereby rejecting necessary public conversations on French racism, sexism and colonialism as illegitimate, foreign products. In contrast, the viral uptake and elaboration of Rebecca Solnit's (2014) critique of mansplaining has provided a new tool, a new argument, a new injunction that can pluralize participation in public spheres and shift how people participate in them. Efforts to regulate participation in publics, of course, have existed since the very emergence of publics as a social form (e.g., Landes 1988). Nevertheless, anxieties about publics run rife at the present moment. This article is an effort to understand, why?

I pursue this end by stitching together two arguments that I had been developing relatively autonomously from one another: one, a critical assessment of theories of the public sphere, the other, an ethnographic analysis of transformations to Macedonian publicity in the 2010s.² Together the arguments highlight a disjuncture between liberal fantasies on how publics ought to be organized and the often quite different ways in which persons and organizations participate in “actually existing publics” today. At the center of these arguments is an attention to a field that scholars and practitioners call “strategic communication” (see Hallahan et al. 2007; Thorson 2013). Encompassing professions such as marketing, brand management, and public relations, the term “strategic communication” refers to intentional and concerted efforts to advance value-producing representations of some target entity (e.g., a business, a product, a place, a politician, oneself) within and across publics. As I will show, the marketing logics that ground strategic communication are now pervasive within many public spheres. In reckoning with the practices of publicity that characterize this marketing-saturated present, I hope to elucidate the politics and anxieties over publicity that wrack contemporary public spheres.

The first line of argument stems from a critical reading of Michael Warner’s groundbreaking 2002 essay, “Publics and Counterpublics.”³ Warner’s essay set forth a theoretical agenda for the study of publicity and it inspired a new wave of interest in the concept of publics. I love this essay and it has been foundational to my own understanding of publics and publicity. But, the more times that I read it, the more I am convinced that Warner’s account of publicity assumes a liberal model of free speech and voluntaristic participation that limit the essay’s conception of media processes and the politics that are organized through them.

The second line of an argument extends from my ongoing research on a massive, government-sponsored, nation-branding project that was undertaken in the Republic of Macedonia (since February 2019, the Republic of North Macedonia) between 2010 and 2016. Named *Skopje 2014*, the nation branding project was to be one of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski’s signature accomplishments. But, like its sponsor, the project has been largely disgraced. Nevertheless, the project represents a stunning example of how branding imperatives to regulate public communication, that is, to advance preferred representations of the brand and to limit unwanted ones, have been taken up as a practice of contemporary statecraft (see Graan 2016a). Importantly, branding, marketing, public relations, and other professional practices of strategic communication are not predicated on volunteered participation in a public, but rather on the management of discursive circulation within public spheres. I develop the concept of *discursive engineering* to describe this strategic mode of participating in a public and I show how it combines practices designed to enhance, but also to constrain, the public circulation of discourse.

In juxtaposing Warner’s essay with my research on the politics of nation branding in Macedonia, this article considers publicity not from liberal assumptions about free speech and voluntary participation but rather from a context in which branding imperatives and political machinations combined to manage and circumscribe permissible forms of publicity (cf. Mazzarella 2013). In dialogue with, but curiously not citing, contemporaneous linguistic anthropological theories of metapragmatics (e.g., Silverstein 1993), discursive circulation (e.g., Bauman and Briggs 1990, 1992, Silverstein and Urban 1996, Spitulnik 1996) and publicity (e.g., Gal and Woolard 2001[1995], Lee 1992, 1993, 1998), Warner conceptualizes publics as an “intertextual environment of citation and implication” (Warner 2002: 97) constituted by practices of public address and based on subject’s reflexive orientation to imagined trajectories of textual circulation.⁴ Furthermore, he links a historically specific ideology of mass publicity—of ongoing, mass-mediated communication among an open-ended set of peers—to modern political movements that express their authority and legitimacy through idioms of popular sovereignty (cf. Gal and Woolard 2001[1995]). In the essay, Warner thus highlights the creative, agentive, and “worldmaking” capacity of

mass publicity. In contrast, my research in Macedonia examines forms of strategic communication that worked to shape and limit the “intertextual environment” of Macedonian publics toward instrumental ends. In stitching between these lines of argument then, I tack from a perspective that celebrates the vitality of publicity, its ability to conjure worlds of collective sharing, to one that confronts elite, professionalized efforts to engineer and enclose public spheres. Ultimately, the article asks: what might this latter vantage point teach us about publics and their politics?

On Warner and Liberal Publicity

To begin, a few words on Michael Warner’s “Publics and Counterpublics” are in order. In the essay, Warner conceptualizes a public as a historically specific socio-political form predicated on address to an open-ended audience of strangers who are oriented to a shared horizon of textual circulation. That is, publicity presupposes a shared intertextual environment—of news, commentary, discussion, opinion, parody, and so on—to which an indeterminate, open-ended group of participants variously aligns (i) through their attention to texts and textual circulation, (ii) through their contribution of new texts to the intertextual environment, and (iii) through their discussion and recontextualization of texts. It is in this sense that Warner describes publics as based on a reflexive orientation to textual circulation. Participation, whether through attention or contribution, implies awareness of a broader, ongoing discussion.

The paradigmatic example of public is a news public. Whether based on some territorial delimitation (e.g., the nation, the municipality), some shared interest (e.g., hip-hop, doll collecting), or some shared identity (e.g., based on gender, sexuality, age, race, religion, or profession), media publications produce and circulate accounts of happenings that are then subjected to further discussion, debate, or parody, or which might become background knowledge made relevant in later contributions. As Warner emphasizes, the trajectories and rhythms of circulation that characterize any given public imbue it with a specific temporality. For example, he contrasts the temporality of a national news public with that of academic publics. One is much slower than the other.

In regard to history, Warner locates and dates the emergence of “the ability to address the world made up by the circulation of cross-referencing discourse” over the late 16th to the late 18th century in “the West” (2002:92). Clearly too the rise of printing and print capitalism is crucial to this history. Warner’s account thus parallels that of Jürgen Habermas (1989) in his work, *The Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere*: both recognize the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere in early modern Europe and its settler colonies as transformative of politics. However, Warner diverges from Habermas in that he does not see the bourgeois public sphere as a normative ideal. Rather, Warner focuses on how the unmarked participation norms that characterized bourgeois publicity (e.g., speech genres that privileged white, male, heterosexual, Christian property-owners) accomplished two things. First, they serve as a condition of possibility for universalizing projections of liberal democracy and “the public” as embodiments of political sovereignty. Second, the barriers to participation that resulted from these pseudo-universalist norms encouraged the emergence of so-called “counterpublics” (see also Fraser 1997). Warner argues that like unmarked “mainstream” publics, counterpublics are predicated on forms of public address and participants’ reflexive orientation to textual circulation. Counterpublics, however, display participation norms (e.g., in terms of speech genres and topic selection) that distinguish them from mainstream publics. Counterpublics also ground a different kind of representation claim, one based on the distinctive interests and identities cultivated in the public rather than the mainstream assumption to represent “the public” in general. One finds in Warner’s work on publics and counterpublics, then, a genealogy of contemporary

identity politics, the critical analysis of which Warner has developed in his contributions to queer theory and his interventions in queer politics (see Warner 1993, 1999).

As this quick overview attests, Warner's approach to publics is nothing short of brilliant. Alongside contemporaneous peer works in linguistic anthropology, Warner's conceptualization of publics wonderfully contributed to linguistic anthropologists' broader elaboration of publicity and discursive circulation (e.g., Agha 2011, Bate 2021, Bishara 2013, Bonilla and Rosa 2015, Briggs 2003, 2005; Cody 2009, 2011, 2015; Gal 2003, 2005, 2006; Gershon 2014, Graan 2016a, 2016b; Graber 2020, Hill 2008, Humpherys 2019, Jackson 2013, Lempert and Silverstein 2012, Paz 2018, Slotta 2019, Vidali 2010, Yeh 2018). But, for some time now, I have been bothered by what I see as tension in Warner's account of publicity. At times, in the essay, he charts a critical reading of bourgeois, liberal publics as a historical form rooted in the North Atlantic Enlightenment. This reading examines the pretenses and exclusions of liberal publicity (see also Warner 1992). At other times, however, he draws on a liberal model of publicity, which assumes subjects' voluntary participation and open-ended discursive circulation, when constructing a general account of a public as a social form. The essay thus displays a foundational ambivalence about liberal publicity, subjecting it to critique on one level but naturalizing it on another.⁵ Let me explain.

When Warner concentrates on elaborating his general account of publicity, he tends to imagine publicity from the perspective of individual participants and to present publics as a *tabula rasa*. In consequence, public address appears as something that is elective, performative, and experimental. As Warner writes:

Public discourse says not only: "Let a public exist," but: "Let it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way." It then goes out in search of confirmation that such a public exists, with greater or lesser success—success being further attempts to cite, circulate, and realize the world-understanding it articulates. Run it up the flagpole, and see who salutes. Put on a show, and see who shows up. (2002:114)

Here, public address, and its imaginative, world-making powers, seemingly presuppose an unencumbered, autonomous subject. Participation and the excitement of participation stem from the risk of extending one's own "world-understanding" across of field of stranger peers and seeing how they will respond.

This sense of active and elective participation appears elsewhere in the essay as well. Indeed, Warner links it to the very imagination of publics as political agents when he writes: "The existence of a public is contingent on its members' activity, however notional or compromised, and not on its members' categorical classification, objectively determined position in the social structure or material self-existence," continuing that:

[Publics] are virtual entities, not voluntary associations. Because their threshold of belonging is an active uptake, however, they can be understood within the conceptual framework of civil society—that is, as having a free, voluntary, and active membership. Wherever a liberal conception of personality obtains, the moment of uptake that constitutes a public can be seen as an expression of volition on the part of its members. And this fact has enormous consequences. It allows us to understand publics as scenes of self-activity, of historical rather than timeless belonging, and of active participation rather than ascriptive belonging. Under the right conditions, it even allows us to attribute agency to a public, even though that public has no institutional being or concrete manifestation. (2002:88)

I want to pause here simply to underscore how this conception of a voluntaristic, agentive public recapitulates a liberal conception of the public sphere organized by elective participation and the free circulation of discourse. To be fair, Warner acknowledges this. He adds caveats such as "wherever a liberal conception of personality obtains," as in the above quote. At other places, he describes this

imaginary of agentive, open-ended egalitarian address as a “practical fiction,” one that is belied by conditions and norms on public participation. Warner is thus quite aware of the restrictions and exclusions that structure participation in publics and bear on whom can claim to represent “the public.” As he writes:

A public seems to be self-organized by discourse, but in fact requires preexisting forms and channels of circulation. It appears to be open to indefinite strangers, but in fact selects participants by criteria of shared social space (though not necessarily territorial space), habitus, topical concerns, intergeneric references, and circulating intelligible forms (including idiolects or speech genres). These criteria inevitably have positive content. They enable confidence that the discourse will circulate along a real path, but they limit the extension of that path. (2002: 106)

Here, it is not individuals who elect to participate in publics but rather publics (or the norms that regiment them) that select who is eligible to participate.

Yet, even though Warner recognizes how participation norms limit who and how people can engage publics, his overarching account of publicity minimizes these constraints. Consider, for example, the theses on publics that structure his essay. They are:

- 1 A public is self-organized.
- 2 A public is a relation among strangers.
- 3 The address of public speech is both personal and impersonal.
- 4 A public is constituted through mere attention.
- 5 A public is a social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse.
- 6 Publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation.
- 7 A public is poetic world-making.

A liberal, agentive, volitional model of the public is privileged as the basis for his more general account. Similarly, when Warner turns to theorize counterpublicity, he also draws on the liberal model. He writes:

Perhaps nothing demonstrates the fundamental importance of discursive publics in the modern social imaginary more than this—that even the counterpublics that challenge modernity’s social hierarchy of faculties do so by projecting the space of discursive circulation among strangers as a social entity, and in doing so fashion their own subjectivities around the requirements of public circulation and stranger-sociability. (2002:121)

In essence, in the essay, Warner works to relativize and criticize the liberal model of publicity but he also uses this model to theorize publicity in general. The result is an uneasy tension. He does describe the structures and norms that constrain publicity. But, he also recapitulates the liberal assumption that publics result from and organize the free exchange of ideas. You simply run public discourse up a flagpole and see who salutes. At these moments, Warner’s conception of publicity resembles the popular model of the public sphere as a “marketplace of ideas,” where individuals are free to contribute viewpoints, the quality of which will be determined by the relative degree of their uptake and circulation. Uniting both is an imaginary by which discourse circulates horizontally and seamlessly, among egalitarian stranger-peers. My research on nation branding and strategic communication in Macedonia suggests some specific ways in which we might complicate this picture.

Structural Transformations of the Macedonian Public Sphere

There is much that could be said about the mass media public sphere in Macedonia and its transformation between 2006 and 2016 (see Graan 2021). In this essay, however, I focus on a set of elite practices that sought to regiment the forms of participation that were permissible in country’s mass news public. These practices

emerged through the design and implementation of a major nation branding project and they included promotional media campaigns, political punditry, legal regulation, and the intimidation of journalists and project critics. The time period in question, 2006–2016, encompasses Nikola Gruevski's tenure as prime minister.

When elected as prime minister in 2006, Gruevski, leader of the right nationalist party, the VMRO-DPME, positioned himself as an economic reformer, focused on liberalizing the Macedonian economy and attracting foreign investment. He launched several initiatives toward this end, but his signature action was an urban renovation and nation branding project named *Skopje 2014*. Through the project, several new buildings and monuments were added to the center of Skopje, Macedonia's capital city. Almost all in neoclassical or baroque style, the additions explicitly contrasted with the socialist-era, modernist architecture that had defined Skopje's built environment. (See Figures 1–5). As the mayor of Skopje stated at the project's launch event in February 2010, *Skopje 2014's* goal was to build a "European" capital for Macedonia and one that would be attractive to tourists. The urban renovation project thus anchored a larger set of initiatives and campaigns that were designed to brand Macedonia as a destination for business and tourism (Graan 2013, 2016a; Graan and Takovski 2017).

However, as Gruevski's time leading the country progressed, he and his party were increasingly charged with the abuse of office and encroachments on media freedom (Photo by Andrew Graan).⁶ After whistleblowers revealed an illegal, government surveillance program that placed wiretaps on the phones of 20,000 people, mass protests and political actions intensified against Gruevski's government. Ultimately, Gruevski left office in 2016 under intense popular and international pressure. In 2018, he was convicted and sentenced to two years in prison by Macedonian courts for the misuse of public funds. However, before being detained,



Figure 1. Skopje's central plaza, "Macedonia Square," in 2004, before the Skopje 2014 project (Photo by Andrew Graan).



Figure 2. Macedonia Square in 2018, after the Skopje 2014 project. The modest flower garden has been replaced by an 8-story tall monument to Alexander the Great.

Gruevski fled to Hungary, where his ally Victor Orban held power, and he was granted political asylum. At the time of this writing, Gruevski remains a fugitive to Macedonian law, resident in Hungary. Quite a bit of drama, to be sure. But how did we get here? How did a poster boy of economic reform transform into a disgraced autocrat? And, how did a project to re-brand Macedonia transform into an effort to quash media freedom and enclose the Macedonian public sphere?

The answer to these questions leads us more deeply into the politics of news media during the Gruevski years. As I have argued elsewhere (2013, 2016a), the urban renovation and nation-branding project that Gruevski spearheaded is best understood as an effort to regiment public spheres. In general, branding and brand management are practices of publicity, that is, they are professional practices that seek to regulate the circulation of discourse within publics (see Graan 2016a). Marketing campaigns are designed to promote authorized representations of the brand while public relations and legal teams work to minimize unauthorized or damaging representations.

Accordingly, in commissioning marketing campaigns that were targeted to publics abroad, the Macedonian government sought to advance preferred representations of



Figure 3. Examples of Skopje 2014's new buildings, bridges and objects along the Vardar River in the city center (Photo by Andrew Graan).

the nation: As “European,” business-friendly, and attractive to tourists. For example, the acclaimed “Macedonia Timeless” campaign that was used to promote Macedonia to outside audiences included video spots that played on *CNN International* and graphic advertisements that appeared in several international newspapers. The spots depicted a Macedonia defined by its rich history and culture, beautiful nature, unique cuisine, and sensuous nightlife in conformity to the larger genre of nation branding advertisements.⁷ In complement, the “Macedonia: A New Business Haven in Europe” campaign included advertisements in *The Wall Street Journal* and *Investor's Business Daily* that trumpeted the vitality of Macedonia's workforce and the ease of doing business in the country. Both campaigns accentuated the official narrative that *Skopje 2014* would broadcast Macedonia's tourism potential and business opportunities to the outside publics. Importantly too, the representations of Macedonia featured across these campaigns implicitly countered pre-existing, negative stereotypes about the Balkans and the former Yugoslavia as “backward” places of political instability and violence.

The *Skopje 2014* project, however, was not only directed to publics abroad. It also enforced, and literally concretized, a particular representation of Macedonian history and the Macedonian nation within Macedonia. The scores of monuments that were added to the urban landscape memorialized a controversial narrative of ethnic Macedonian ethnogenesis and national awakening, one that claimed Alexander the Great as ur-ancestor (see Dimova 2013, Janev 2011, Koteska 2011, Risteski 2016, Vangeli 2011). Hence, the neoclassical structures, the centerpiece of which was an eight-story tall monument to Alexander in Skopje's central plaza. This materialized narrative asserted the antiquity and Europeaness of the Macedonian ethnos, but only by erasing Macedonia's multi-ethnic character—specifically its sizeable ethnic Albanian population as well as its smaller Turkish, Rom, Vlach, Serbian, and Balkan Egyptian minorities—and its history as part of socialist Yugoslavia. The project's version of Macedonian national history also was sure to provoke neighboring Greece, which had long claimed monopoly rights over the name “Macedonia” and the legacy of Alexander, as evidenced in the 28-year naming dispute between the countries.⁸ Thus, although presented as an economic development and rebranding project, from its inception *Skopje 2014* was also a highly politicized exercise in muscular nationalism.

In its design and aesthetics, *Skopje 2014* thus grounded a multi-modal campaign to advance a divisive, controversial narrative on Macedonian identity within the



Figure 4. A detail of the Macedonia Government Building. The once modernist building was given a new, neoclassical façade as part of the Skopje 2014 project (Photo by Andrew Graan).

Macedonian public sphere. The new buildings and monuments symbolized this narrative within Skopje's built environment.⁹ The neoclassical and baroque styles featured in the project respectively indexed the "antiquity" and "Europeanness" of the Macedonian nation, in contrast to the Ottoman-era structures (mosques, caravansaries, bathhouses) that dominate Skopje's Old Bazaar district and the mid-century modernist architecture that otherwise prevailed in the city.¹⁰ In complement to the symbolism of the *Skopje 2014* structures and the official narrative on the project, a slew of newspaper and magazine stories, popular histories, talk shows, political speeches, and television documentaries—often supported by the government—examined Macedonia's antique history and the figure of Alexander the Great in ways that extended the project's nationalist narrative across the Macedonian public sphere (see Neofotistos 2012). The result was an urban landscape and national mediascape mutually saturated by *Skopje 2014's* account of the Macedonian past.

The Gruevski government, however, did not only propagate this controversial narrative on Macedonian identity. In a variety of ways, it also led or tacitly endorsed efforts to police public space and the public sphere in order to "protect" its chosen nation brand. In regard to public space, new laws were passed to clamp down on littering, loitering, smoking, and after-hours alcohol sales so as to cultivate a national



Figure 5. Skopje's new triumphal arch, with the Alexander statue in the background (Photo by Andrew Graan).

ambiance that was imagined as desirable to foreign tourists and investors. Remarkably, the government also commissioned a series of public service announcements that instructed Macedonians on how to conduct themselves when in the company of foreign visitors (see Graan 2016a). The series, titled "You are the Face of Your Country," was jocular in tone: It imagined an "Australian Crocodile Hunter" type encountering Macedonian wildlife, here figured through negative stereotypes of the inattentive waiter, the nosy bed-and-breakfast owner, the overbearing alpha male, and so on (See Figures 6–7). Nevertheless, the messaging was clear: Macedonian citizens were expected to "live the brand" (Aronczyk 2008), which entailed policing behavior to conform to the imagined norms of international tourism. The laws and public service announcements thus functioned to regulate public space and the ways in which Macedonians could represent the country in public interactions. (Let it be noted, however, that, while the Gruevski government was especially zealous in its efforts to cultivate a desired "image" by regulating public space and public speech, such practices accompany tourist economies and nation branding projects wherever they might be found.)

In regard to the Macedonian public sphere on politics, the Gruevski government marshaled its branding project, its nationalist narrative, and its institutional power to marginalize and silence political opponents. As I will detail below, the government sought to prop up friendly news networks and publications, for instance, by buying advertisements, and to undermine critical media organizations, for instance, through court cases and by refusing to buy advertising (cf. Cody and Paz 2021, Fediriko 2021). Over time, such actions bankrupted or crippled critical media, creating a media ecology warped to the government's preference. Government friendly media, in addition to government supporters on social media, then propagated a discourse in which government critics were routinely labeled as "traitors," "communists," "Sorosians" and "freaks," whose unfounded or politically motivated complaints risked tarnishing the national image (Bejkova 2020, cf. Udupa 2019).

In the *Skopje 2014* project, one thus finds an extraordinary example of what I term *discursive engineering*, that is, strategic efforts to determine how discourse will or will not circulate in some public. Some of these efforts centered on the creation and circulation of preferred entextualizations of Macedonian identity. Thus, the designers



Figure 6. A still from Macedonian Tourism Board's "You Are the Face of Your Country" campaign. The Crocodile Hunter figure discovers a Macedonian Lakeside Waiter "in the wild."



Figure 7. The "You Are the Face of Your Country" campaign logo, with the official seal of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia underneath it. This slide concluded each of the commercials produced for the campaign.

of the urban renovation project used discrete buildings and monuments to materialize a muscular narrative on Macedonian ethnogenesis. These structures then gave a pretext for media productions and public discussions that took up and advanced these narratives, often but not always with government support. And indeed, although controversial, the *Skopje 2014* project and its unapologetic narrative on Macedonian national identity did appeal to many ordinary citizens who embraced and further circulated arguments on Macedonian history and identity (see Graan 2021). Toward outside publics, the renovation project was also magnified by several promotional campaigns that celebrated Macedonia as a destination for business and tourism.

Organized through *Skopje 2014* were thus several complementary projects of strategic communication. These coordinated projects unfolded gradually, amplifying one another along the way and generating popular uptake, at least to some degree. They exemplify discursive engineering in a *constructive* mode: Here strategic communication is used to build intertextual environments that enhance the public circulation of authorized or preferred discourse. Indeed, this kind of discursive engineering is characteristic of marketing and brand management, which seek to develop and extend brand attachments across advertising genres, user engagements, celebrity endorsements, and so on.

Yet, the *Skopje 2014* case also illustrates how discursive engineering can sculpt intertextual environments through practices of *exclusion*. For example, the “Crocodile Hunter” public service announcements marked some forms of speech and behavior as inappropriate to Macedonia’s nation branding project. The nationalist rhetoric on “traitors” and “communists” functioned metapragmatically, to signal what kinds of language were permissible to the public sphere of Gruevski’s Macedonia and which were not. The government’s antagonistic actions toward critical media outlets reshaped media infrastructures and media access in ways that damaged government critics’ ability to participate in public discussion of the country’s politics. In these cases, the Macedonian public sphere was made to privilege the government’s narratives by actions and metadiscourses that marginalized and excluded alternatives. Whereas constructive forms of discursive engineering seek to facilitate the circulation of desired texts, exclusionary forms of discursive engineering seek to constrain or prevent the circulation of undesired texts.

Taking a step back, we can see how Gruevski’s primary vehicle for economic development, the urban renovation, and nation branding project that was *Skopje 2014*, also became a vehicle for his autocratic designs on power. While it is not necessarily the case, branding logics of national promotion proved quite compatible with Gruevski’s attack on his critics and rivals, as both exercised means to regulate public spheres and the former could justify the latter. *Skopje 2014* thus attests to the prevalence and the power of discursive engineering as a mode of participating in publics.

Discursive Engineering in an Age of Strategic Communication

Branding, marketing, and public relations are now endemic to many contemporary publics. Governments (Aronczyk 2013, Fattal 2018, Bajoghli 2019), corporations (Dávila 2012, Mazzarella 2003, Shankar 2015, 2020), central banks (Holmes 2014), and even militaries (Stein 2012) now hire communication professionals to manage public image and to pursue goals through, it is hoped, consistent and savvy messaging. So too do politicians and celebrities. Albeit on a different scale, practices of managed, public self-presentation also inform contemporary job-seeking practices (Gershon 2016).

The extraordinary rise of social media platforms in the 2000s and 2010s have only further entrenched practices of strategic communication. On one level, as Jia Tolentino (2019) keenly observed, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are built around the personal profile as the pillar of user engagement. This did not have to be the case. The centrality of the personal profile, however, installs a preference for curated forms of self-presentation into the very infrastructure of social media platforms: The seeming purpose of social media, Tolentino (2019:8) argues, “is to make yourself look good.” Influencers on social media seek to capitalize on this logic by branding and commodifying the persona constructed through posts to one’s profile (see Marwick 2015). Furthermore, platform algorithms surveil and amplify the persona and preferences recorded through the personal profile, such that, “everything we see corresponds to our conscious choices and algorithmically guided preferences” (Tolentino 2019: 14). In short, most social media platforms expect that users will engage in self-centric forms of discursive engineering and encourage them to do so as a fundamental part of their business model.

On another level, social media, and Facebook in particular, affords third-party groups enormous opportunities for strategic communication. The data that Facebook collects on its users allows businesses and organizations to target advertisements and messages to groups who are algorithmically determined as receptive (see also Zuboff 2019). This also enables specific advertisements and messages to be pre-designed to resonate intertextually with the preferences, interests, and media engagement history recorded by the profile. Donald Trump’s

2016 presidential campaign became infamous for such activity when the firm Cambridge Analytica mined Facebook user data to produce and distribute on Facebook highly specific campaign ads that were tailored to appeal to a whole range of typified voter profiles (Marantz 2020). Similarly, partisan hackers or “trolls” sometimes try to game social media and search algorithms so as to flood social media feeds, circulate “fake news,” trend or de-trend hashtags, elevate or bury stories, and so on (see Udupa 2019). Obviously, there is much more that one could say about social media and the forms of discursive engineering that they facilitate, but suffice it to say that strategic communication is an undeniable ethnographic fact of our marketing-saturated present.

Importantly, strategic communication is fundamentally about publicity. Professionals who engage in strategic communication must develop a keen, reflexive understanding of the ways that publics circulate textual and visual artifacts. Indeed, their job is to shape how discourse circulates in a public in such a way that it produces value for their clients and employers. For instance, brand management exists as a social project that seeks to control how commodity objects are represented in publics so as to profit from their circulation in markets (see Lury 2004; Mazzarella 2003 on “keeping while giving”). Such practices constitute forms of discursive engineering. They are interdiscursive and metadiscursive interventions that aim to regiment how objects, knowledge, and representations circulate and thereby contribute to value-formation.

Significantly too, strategic communication represents a specialized way of participating in a public. As argued above, Warner presents elective, individual acts of public address as the default way in which social actors participate in publics, a view that is shared by liberal conceptions of the public sphere. Strategic communication, however, makes a different sort of intervention in publics. It is a mode of participation that anticipates how discourse might circulate and then designs discourse and intertexts reflexively in pursuit of a preferred circulatory trajectory. Such is the work conducted by brand managers, political consultants, public relation specialists, social media influencers, and so on. Via forms of discursive engineering, strategic communication not only contributes to publics, it also tries to orchestrate them.

Of course, efforts at strategic communication fail at, or fall short of, their stated aim more often than they succeed. Commenting on this phenomenon, a headline from the satiric newspaper, *The Onion* (2007), once quipped how a, “Perfectly Marketed TV Show Somehow Fails.” (See Figure 8 here). Nevertheless, despite its susceptibility to failure and misfires, strategic communication constitutes a major dynamic within many contemporary publics and so it warrants attention by theorists of publicity.

Although practices of discursive engineering are as old as the public sphere—they include forms of propaganda, prescriptivism, and censorship—with the stunning expansion of marketing and PR industries they now pervade public spheres (Courtesy of *The Onion*).¹¹ Indeed, discursive engineering is central to what Michel Callon, Cécile Méadel and Vololona Rabeharisoa (2002) have called “an economy of qualities,” in which a commodity’s value is maintained or transformed by the ongoing forms of qualification and requalification that add or subtract meanings and associations to/from a product. As they write (2002: 199), “qualification aims to establish a constellation of characteristics, stabilized at least for a while, which are attached to the product and transform it temporarily into a tradable good in the market.” Discursive engineering describes how such (re)qualification takes place. It is the labor of (re)positioning the indexicalities of a product *within* publics and of sculpting the interdiscursive environment in which it is valued (Cf. Lury 2004; Mazzarella 2003; Appadurai 1986).

My argument is that the economy of qualities unfolds within and through publics, and furthermore, that publics themselves can come to be organized through such practices. In some sense, then, this argument parallels that of Habermas in second half of the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. In this part of the book, he



Figure 8. A commentary in the satirical newspaper The Onion on the limits of marketing prowess.

argues that capitalist culture industries ultimately colonized, commercialized, and "refeudalized" the bourgeois public sphere, undermining its democratizing political potential.¹²

Similarly, I contend that the economy of qualities and the marketing-derived forms of discursive engineering that it depends on have resulted in a historically specific kind of public in which the public sphere is conceptualized in terms of market processes rather than as a place for civil society (cf. Boyer and Yurchak 2010, Graan 2018). These *marketing publics* are ones in which marketing imperatives trump the value of free speech and egalitarian participation (Lempert and Silverstein 2012; Graan, Hodges, Stalcup and Lee 2020). Indeed, many social media platforms encode this logic into their basic operation, spurring on small-scale and large-scale practices of strategic communication. The forms of discursive engineering implemented through marketing practice thus organize a public sphere that is decidedly different than Habermas' bourgeois public sphere and that refutes Warner's claim that publics, "can be understood within the conceptual framework of civil society—that is, as having a free, voluntary, and active membership" (Warner 2002:88).

Although contemporary practices of discursive engineering might thus appear to conflict with the model of the liberal public sphere, nevertheless, as I see it, discursive engineering constitutes but an alternative practice of “worldmaking.” Warner, of course, celebrated how public address and the reflexive circulation of discourse could poetically figure social worlds. In Warner’s model, publicity is charged with a vitality and creativity that blurs into the emancipatory. The discursive engineering of the marketing age also seeks to create worlds. But, instead of opening up a space of open-ended and egalitarian participation, it works to constrain, harness, and enclose circulation, to entextualize preferred representations while marginalizing unauthorized ones. This is not the poetic world-making of liberalism but the manufacture of enclosed worlds within the commercialized, brand-populated, marketing publics of neoliberal capitalism.

Discursive Engineering and the Enclosure of the Macedonian Public Sphere

As I see it then, the nation-branding-inspired interventions into the Macedonian public sphere, which valorized some modes of participation and discouraged others, constituted an effort to engineer a particular sort of public. Such efforts at discursive engineering channel highly professionalized, elite strategies and practices that manifest in coordinated, multi-modal forms of messaging. They often command sizeable resources and legal protections that contribute to production values, media access, and penetration. They are planned and sustained as multiple and repeated interventions into the public sphere that interact with and within the reflexive circulation of discourse. They recruit allies who amplify desired messaging and who discourage oppositional messaging. As with Callon, Méadel, and Rabeharisoa’s conception of the economy of qualities, these marketing age publics are driven by serial acts of qualification and requalification, that is, by serial acts of discursive engineering and the metapragmatic framing of public discourse.

Such a marketing age public contrasts with Michael Warner’s general model of publicity. For example, a sustained project of brand management, that operates through mass produced commodities; logos and taglines; advertisements in print, video, and social media; celebrity endorsements; product placement in film and television; and a division of lawyers does not quite compare with a moment of public discourse that projects a specific character, way of speaking, and way of seeing the world and that “then goes out in search of confirmation that such a public exists.” Yes, strategic communication projects operate through public address and any given project’s vision of the world must be taken up—an always contingent event—to be recirculated. But, at a more basic level, these projects in their ubiquity shape the intertextual environments predicated by mass publicity in two senses. First, they can succeed—at least temporarily—in orchestrating or engineering particular intertextual networks.¹³ Second, and more powerfully, the very practice of strategic communication can serve as a metapragmatic model for how individuals and organizations should participate in publics. For instance, increasingly one can find the metapragmatic discourse on the importance of being “on narrative” or on the need to “flip the narrative” when one’s identity is met with unwelcome uptakes. Such talk signals the degree to which marketing imperatives organize how people participate in public spheres.

The media tactics employed under the auspices of *Skopje 2014* should thus not be taken lightly or written off as exceptional. The form of publicity that they implement is not that of egalitarian worldmaking, of conjuring text-mediated community through voluntaristic self-expression. Rather, this form of publicity manifests through efforts to construct a public, metadiscursively and intertextually, and in the Macedonian case, the goal was a public that was closed off to political criticism against Gruevski. Such publics emerge through forms of discursive engineering that seeks *enclosure* by limiting how discourse circulates.

Further details from the Macedonian case will make this all the clearer. With Gruevski's rise to power, his party, the VMRO, stepped up their use of sophisticated political marketing strategies. As one media strategist in Macedonia told me in an interview, it was really the VMRO under Gruevski's leadership that brought advanced PR and marketing techniques to Macedonian politics. According to him, the VMRO moved beyond elections-focused media campaigns toward an ongoing and sustained communications strategy. Strategists and party leaders met regularly to decide on core issues and messages; talking points were prepared for media appearances; unscripted media appearances were minimized; and relationships were cultivated with sympathetic journalists and broadcasters while "hostile" journalists and broadcasters were shunned. Eventually, VMRO snubs against critical media came to be interpreted as a message that firms should not advertise with these outlets if they wanted to do business with the government (see Tahiri 2020: 306). Alliances between broadcasters and the party—in some cases after VMRO allies bought controlling shares of television stations and newspapers—led to editorial policy and ancillary media (e.g., talk shows and documentaries) that tended to flatter and support the VMRO's political narratives (see Bejkova 2020, Gjuzelov and Ivanovska Hadjievska 2020, Tahiri 2020), for example, Marina Dojčinovska's show *Macedonium* (see Neofotistos 2012) and Milenko Nedelkovki's eponymous show, among many others. Such media personalities may not have been formally under the direction of Gruevski or the VMRO but they found it advantageous to align themselves with the party and to proselytize on its behalf.¹⁴ Finally, the party also commissioned a slew of public service advertisements, for example, to support the use of the Cyrillic alphabet, to honor the Macedonian flag, and to promote having a third child (see Crvenkovska-Risteska 2018). Through these combined means, the political apparatus of the VMRO infiltrated media publics in Macedonia in an unprecedented manner, and the party's own media strategy was amplified by partners, allies, supporters, and sympathizers who, for a variety of reasons, extended the party's nationalist vision in their own contributions to the Macedonian public sphere.

As with the *Skopje 2014* project itself, the VMRO's public messaging and media tactics proved divisive. To be sure, many Macedonians responded positively to Gruevski's brand of nationalism, taking up the sundry narratives on Macedonian ethnic identity amplified by *Skopje 2014* and its accompanying media. For example, during a visit to Skopje in 2012, I met an old acquaintance, a merchant, who I had known from the days of my doctoral research in 2003 and 2004. After an obligatory exchange to catch up, he soon shifted the topic of conversation. As my fieldnotes recorded, "Toše then shared his excitement over *Skopje 2014* and the 'beautiful' Alexander sculpture and fountain. He relayed that an academic had recently confirmed that only current day Macedonians preserve the genetic stock from Alexander's time. The Bulgarians were diluted by Tatars, and Greeks are originally from Africa, he asserted. What would Martin Bernal think of this, I wondered. A full 30% of current Macedonian DNA matches that of the ancients, he said assuredly. And, he reports that the new sculptures and monuments have been drawing tourists. They have been coming from Holland, Turkey, and neighboring countries. . ." In this relatively short exchange, the merchant wove together and elaborated on both the racializing nationalism advanced by the *Skopje 2014* project and the government's promise of its nation branding success.

At the same time, however, many, many other Macedonians vehemently opposed the *Skopje 2014* project and rejected, even ridiculed, its nationalist narrative as an artificial process of "antiquization" that would transform Skopje into a "capital of kitsch" (see Vangeli 2011; Graan 2013). Thus, from the first signs of the urban renovation project in 2009, when the VMRO proposed building a large church in Skopje's central square, to the period following the official announcement of the *Skopje 2014* project in 2010, many groups organized to stage public demonstrations and writers published numerous essays' criticizing the political, economic and aesthetic logics of the project.¹⁵ Tellingly, one of the first such demonstrations, a

protest against the building of the church, ended in an attack by pro-government thugs, with police refusing to intervene (see Janev 2011, Vilić 2009). The signal seemed clear: the Gruevski administration would not tolerate public opposition. Subsequent actions served to confirm this.

Specifically, in addition to its proactive approach to political marketing, the VMRO also pursued exclusionary measures that would isolate and even undermine journalists and news outlets that were considered to be overly critical of the party and the Prime Minister. Notably and most visibly, in November 2010, Velja Ramkovski, the owner of Macedonia's largest and most popular independent television station, *A1*, was arrested on suspicious charges of tax evasion and money laundering. He was later convicted and sentenced to thirteen years in prison. Relatedly, in 2013, journalist Tomislav Kežarovski was arrested on charges of revealing the identity of government protected witness and also sentenced to prison. Both arrests, alongside libel cases against journalists, were interpreted as a warning to news organizations that would defy the government (cf. Cody and Paz 2021). The government also began to practice advertising favoritism, directing its large advertising budget toward friendly media to the detriment of critical media (see Marusic 2015b, Апостолов 2019, Gjuzelov and Ivanovska Hadjievaska 2020, Tahiri 2020).

More ominously, those journalists who continued to produce critical reports were often attacked as "traitors," "Sorosians," "hirelings" or foreign agents by pro-government media (see Bejkova 2020). Especially notorious were several online, government-aligned news portals, such as *Kurir*, *Republika*, and *Libertas*, which would regularly publish "hit job" stories on government critics, often anonymously.¹⁶ Attacks published on the online portals might then be referenced in reports published on "more respectable" television and print media, building an intertextual chain of slander (Tahiri 2020: 30). Similarly, pro-VMRO shock jocks would attack journalists and encourage their audiences to do the same. Infamously, Milenko Nedelkovski aired a video on this television program that depicted one of his followers accosting and spitting on journalist Borjan Jovanovski in a restaurant. For those few independent media outlets that persevered and that continued to publish fact-based criticism of VMRO policies, one final strategy was simply ignorance. As the editor of one of Macedonia's most respected, independent news organizations told me in a 2018 interview, oftentimes following reporting that raised questions about the cost and financing of *Skopje 2014* the government would simply ignore the stories and pretend as if they did not exist. Silence too then became a weapon in the VMRO's effort to engineer the Macedonian public sphere on politics.

Through the *Skopje 2014* campaigns, the public discourses on traitors, the aggressive communications strategy, and the multi-faceted attack on independent media, Gruevski, his allies, and his supporters transformed the character of the Macedonian public sphere in a remarkably short period of time. As Naser Selmani, the president of the Association of Journalists of Macedonia stated in 2014, "the government had managed to institute total control over vast number of media. They were turned into propaganda instruments, praising government policies and fighting anybody that thinks differently from the authorities" (quoted in Tahiri 2020). The effect was one of capture, of an enclosed public sphere.

Under such conditions, critical voices were pushed outside of the mainstream public sphere buttressed by the country's largest media organizations. In particular, social media platforms proved crucial to public and activist efforts to (re)create a public in which criticism of the Gruevski government could circulate. As Biljana Bejkova (2020:222) explains, "new media and social networks provided 'free zones' where authorities did not have and could not install control and censorship." These "free zone" social media publics enabled the popular opposition to organize and to circulate information (see Takovski 2019, cf. Bonilla and Rosa 2015). Indeed, the Twitter hashtag, #protestiram [#IProtest], served as an organizing mantra and symbol for the 2015 protests against the VMRO administration.¹⁷ Ultimately, it took

years of mass protest and activism to remove Gruevski from power and to re-pluralize a public sphere that had been subjected to VMRO monopolization (for more on this, see Graan 2021). In the end, then, the VMRO's sustained, multi-faceted project of discursive engineering failed. Macedonia emerged as a rare case where citizens succeeded in peacefully wresting power back from a political leadership with authoritarian designs, but not before the VMRO had remade the Macedonian public sphere and controlled Macedonian politics for a decade.

As I report on the media context of Macedonia during the Gruevski years, I want to be clear about my argument. It would be easy for one to conclude that the VMRO's sustained infiltration of a mass media public on Macedonian politics was yet another manifestation of East European or Balkan illiberalism. This is *not* my argument. Rather, as I have suggested, the VMRO policies extend from and mirror the broader embrace of marketing and PR strategies among political actors the world over.

In this sense, the Macedonian case has more in common with the contemporary United States than it does with East Germany or Ceaușescu's Romania. For, strategic communication imperatives now permeate American politics, and politicians work to develop attractive public personae, what Lempert and Silverstein (2012) call, "message," among targeted publics. They, and their public relations staff, do so via selective media engagements, strategic communication across media genres, and through practices of "spin," which seek to amplify favorable media attention and to minimize negative media attention. Through these means, a politicians' message is maintained via serial acts of semiotic qualification and requalification (to echo Callon, et al.) within and across public spheres.¹⁸ These practices are akin to the Gruevski government's efforts to establish a positive brand identity for Macedonia within targeted publics abroad.

Similarly, VMRO discourses on traitors, hirelings, and foreign agents parallel the rhetoric on "fake news" (see Graan, Hodges, Stalcup and Lee 2020) that Donald Trump and his supporters used to attack many established, centrist news organizations in the United States. As with the term, "traitor," the label of "fake news" functioned as a metapragmatic characterization that affected how news discourse would circulate in publics. That is, within Trumpist publics, the alleged "fake news" produced by centrist news organizations could only circulate as an object of derision or parody. It was disqualified from circulation as valid information in its own right. These aggressive acts of discursive engineering function to enclose or "split" publics (see Rajagopal 2001), as made evident by recent concern over "media bubbles" and other descriptors of polarized publics (Slotta 2019; Graan 2021).

The media tactics evident during the VMRO rule in Macedonia—media cronyism, attacks on journalism, the metadiscursive polarization of the public sphere—all have analogs in the contemporary United States and in many other purportedly liberal democracies. As I have argued here, these tactics emerge from a more general ideology and practice of publicity rooted in marketing logics. From this perspective, what distinguishes the case of VMRO-led Macedonia is not the VMRO's media tactics in and of themselves but the degree to which they were pursued within the institutional infrastructure and discursive space of the Macedonian public sphere on politics. The VMRO case is an example of sustained "discursive engineering" that sought the near monopolistic regimentation of the Macedonian mass news public. Of course, the VMRO's temporary success in capturing the Macedonian public sphere on politics should not be separated from the size and poverty of the country, which created structural vulnerabilities that were all too easy to exploit (Mattioli 2020). Significantly too, Macedonia's European and American "supporters," pleased with the country's economic liberalization and preoccupied by the financial crises of 2008, initially turned a blind eye to Gruevski's power grab thereby enabling it. The VMRO example is thus an extreme manifestation of the reflexive engineering of publicity, but one I argue that is qualitatively similar to the PR and communications apparatuses found in other political contexts.

Conclusion

So, where does this all leave us? On the one hand, I have argued that Michael Warner's approach to publicity is burdened by tension. He offers a critical reading of liberal publicity, identifying the normative, difference-making structures that belie claims to egalitarianism, but he also models his own account of publics and counterpublics on liberal publicity. Although he does mention the norms and metapragmatics that mediate and constrain participation in publics, he nonetheless privileges an individualistic and egalitarian view on publicity. Publicity is about trying things out. Running a flag up a pole to see who salutes.

On the other hand, I have examined a specific case, the transformation of the Macedonian public sphere on politics during the rule of Nikola Gruevski and his party, the VMRO-DPMNE. This historical period was marked by intensive and sustained efforts to engineer the intertextual environment of citation and implication that comprised Macedonian mass publicity. While this case is admittedly an extreme one, I argue that the practices and processes used to transform Macedonian mass publicity—that is, coordinated communications strategies and allied tactics to advance preferred representations of political reality and to minimize undesirable one—conform to a more general logic of strategic communications that manifests in branding, marketing, and public relations projects all around the world. The results are marketing publics, that is, publics organized by marketing logics and the forms of discursive engineering on which they depend.

From Warner's perspective, the VMRO's colonization of Macedonian mass publicity could only be seen as exceptional and even as totalitarian, as a state-led assault on the self-organizing character of publics that is so crucial to the political imaginaries that they enable. There is, of course, an important point here. And, in Macedonia to be sure, independent journalists, critics of the VMRO government, and eventually masses of protestors decried the erosion of free speech under Gruevski and his administration's growing autocracy. They also worked passionately, and at personal risk, to resist government incursions in the Macedonian public sphere and to devise new forums—online and in the street—to reclaim a critical public (cf. Bonilla and Rosa 2015).

Nonetheless, in foregrounding the plight of Macedonian publicity, I contend that instead of seeing the VMRO's infiltration of the Macedonian public sphere, as exceptional, as mass publicity gone awry, we should instead view it as an example of an all too commonplace phenomenon. Efforts to engineer the intertextual environment of publicity are now ubiquitous. Indeed, contemporary discourses on disinformation, fake news, cancel culture, political correctness, and free speech both reflect and enact a parallel set of processes. While most fail to reach the scale that was achieved for a short time in Macedonia, we should attend to these processes in their everyday manifestations. Yes, we should continue to analyze the forms of public address and the interdiscursive chains that constitute publics. But, we should also look ethnographically and analytically at sustained and coordinated efforts to transform, engineer, and enclose publics. Indeed, if the proliferation of "fake news" text artifacts and "fake news" as a media metadiscourse are any indication, efforts at engineering the intertextual environment of publicity warrant analysis more than ever before.

In addition, when we turn an ethnographic lens onto contemporary practices of discursive engineering, we can also gain a new purchase on the politics of free speech (see Candea, Wright, Heywood, and Fedirko 2021). Ideals of free speech are always mediated by particular regimes of publicity, that is, the norms, ideologies, and metadiscourses that organize participation in a public. We can thus ask the question: What kind of free speech politics do marketing publics produce? Obviously, there is no single answer to this question, but it does suggest that definitions of and anxieties about free speech are historically specific. And, in the present, it is surely not coincidental that "free speech" is most vociferously politicized in relation to

metadiscourses that explicitly regiment public spheres, such as metadiscourses that mark racist, misogynist, and homophobic speech as “toxic” within publics infused by marketing logics.

In the end, then, rather than centering publics on acts of public address and the possibility of circulation, this paper works to highlight discursive engineering as an ethnographic fact and as a mode of participating in contemporary publics. The view that I have put forward here thus encourages us to ask: How do states and corporations address publics, and what tools do they use to capture the circulatory field that they presuppose as an addressable entity (cf. Warner 2002:113)? How might we characterize this variety of participation and its effects on others’ capacity to contribute to and shape publics? In doing so, we complexify our models of participation in mass publicity. We foreground hierarchy, asymmetry, and inequality in public participation, not only in terms of interactional participant roles but also in the interdiscursive consequences of sustained, coordinated, large-scale efforts to shape the form and content of publicity. From this perspective, the participation norms that structure publics appear not as elements in the background, not as context presupposed by public address, but as ongoing interdiscursive and metadiscursive constraints on participation. This view of publicity leads us away from a model of publicity understood primarily as communication among egalitarian stranger-peers. But, in so doing we foreground anew the machinations and struggles over participation in contemporary contexts of mass publicity.

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Notes

1. As one of the manuscript reviewers noted, precisely these concerns also drive the discussion of “content moderation” on social media platforms.

2. I use the term “publicity” to describe the general phenomenon of participation in publics. One can thus discuss various “practices of publicity” or the “politics of publicity.” This technical usage of the term “publicity” stems from the English language translation of Jürgen Habermas’ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (See Habermas 1989: xv-xvi, 1-5). It is distinct from the commonplace understanding of publicity as a type of marketing or advertising, as when an actor “does publicity” for a new film.

3. The essay first appeared, slightly abridged, in the Winter 2002 issue of *Public Culture*. My references, however, are to the unabridged version of the essay which appeared later that year in Warner’s (2002) collection of essays, also titled *Publics and Counterpublics*.

4. It is worth noting that Warner was a participant at the Center for Psychosocial Studies, later the Center for Transcultural Studies (<https://thects.org/>), directed by linguistic anthropologist Benjamin Lee. In addition to important meetings on critical theory and

psychoanalysis, the Center also sponsored several workshops on language and semiotics. Some of the results were a series of highly influential volumes in linguistic anthropology, for example (Mertz 1985, Wertsch 1985, Lee and Urban 1989, Lucy 1993, Gal and Woolard 1995, Silverstein and Urban 1996). Furthermore, as Calhoun (1992: ix) reports, a Center seminar inspired the conference that resulted in the edited volume, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, to which both Warner and Lee contributed chapters.

5. See Bishara 2013 and Cody 2015 for different but complementary critiques on liberal bias in theories of the public sphere.

6. The Gruevski government's threat to media freedom was well documented, resulting several public protests by journalists in Macedonia and in statements and reports by the EU, the OSCE, the European Federation of Journalists, Reporters without Borders among others. For a sample of news reporting on this matter, see Marusic 2011, 2013, 2015a.

7. Famed Macedonian director Milcho Manchevski directed the first video for the "Macedonian Timeless" campaign. It can be viewed on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4HGpfmVOjU>

8. For more on the naming dispute and the 2019 treaty that ended it, see Neofotistos 2021.

9. See Janev 2011 for a parallel argument on the ethnonational "narrative space" that the Skopje 2014 attempted to construct through its redesign of Skopje's built environment.

10. Interestingly, over the last decade, Skopje's modernist architecture has been at the center of an international re-evaluation and celebration of Yugoslavia's distinct architectural styles. See Linke and Weiss 2012, Stierli and Kulić 2018. For a more critical perspective on this phenomenon, see Eror 2019.

11. As a friend who works in journalism remarked to me: The much-discussed, mass closure of news outlets in the wake of the internet was ultimately matched by the explosion of careers in "communications." This correlation deserves examination.

12. I do not, however, share Habermas' metanarrative of paradise lost, of a normative ideal of reason that was tarnished by commerce and pleasure.

13. One encounters a common example of such engineered intertextual environments when online user tracking apps and cookies produce those uncanny moments when an errant internet search results in eerily resonant ads and recommendations following one across apps and devices.

14. See Fedirko 2021 for an insightful analysis of how journalists employed at a government-allied news outlet in Ukraine envision and justify their work.

15. For a sample of these early, critical writings against Skopje 2014 see the essays collected in Gelevski 2010a and 2010b.

16. Bejkova (2020) provides an example of this. In 2012, Lidija Dimova, director of the Macedonian Centre for European Training, an NGO, addressed the European Parliament, speaking critically about the government's use of EU "Instrument of Pre-Accession" funds. As Bejkova (2020:223) writes, "The pro-government media did not cover Dimova's address at the European Parliament and did not seek her statement or comment, but fiercely, manipulatively and propagandistically attacked and criticized her of allegedly having requested 'the EU to cancel IPA funds for Macedonia' and commented that 'sorosoid Dimova had spat on Macedonia.'"

17. Lest one be hasty in celebrating social media and internet as sites for emancipatory publicity, it is worth mentioning that social media and the internet publics are also organized by participation norms that can be exclusionary. For example, Takovski (2016) remarks how the activist publics trafficking in parodic memes against the Gruevski administration skewed toward young, male participants. In addition, social media and internet publics can also be targets for discursive engineering. In Macedonia, I have spoken to people who claim to have been paid to post online to advance a particular political agenda, a more general, international practice sometimes described as "troll farming." Moreover, governments often restrict access to social media and internet sites.

18. Interestingly, so-called "cancel culture" describes a related practice of the semiotic (re) qualification of a public persona. That is, the call to "cancel" someone in the wake of abusive behavior or inappropriate public speech is a metadiscursive injunction to not circulate that individual's or organization's public speech or media artifacts. It is the inverse of brand management, a grassroots effort to police public spheres of hate speech and similar transgressions. And perhaps more than all else, it is because "canceling" can function as a weapon of the weak that the practices have been the subject of such strong, conservative backlash.

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