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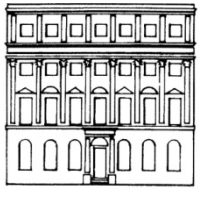

BULLETIN

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The Global Public: Its Power and its Limits
Conference Report
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The Global Public: Its Power and its Limits. Conference held at the German Historical Institute London, 22–24 Oct. 2015. Conveners: Valeska Huber (German Historical Institute London); Jürgen Osterhammel (Forschungsstelle Globale Prozesse, University of Konstanz).

A conference held at the German Historical Institute London brought together scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds to explore a topic of political urgency. While digital media have simplified global communication in an unprecedented manner, at present we are witnessing political fragmentation, warmongering, and atrocities in many parts of the world. This paradox makes it all the more important to enquire into the power and limits of a global public in terms of its ability to reach different regions and audiences and its political potency. For this purpose the conference took a broad conceptual approach. Rather than focusing on different world regions, it centred on definitions and conceptions, infrastructural and linguistic preconditions, markets and audiences, and the politics of the global public.

The conference looked at the 'long twentieth century' from the 1870s to the present, when new technologies, above all, telegraphy, mass print, radio, and later film provided new ways of exchanging information. Consequently, one of the key questions was to what extent conceptions of a global public and relevant practices depended on these technologies. How and when did a global public sphere become a market for news or entertainment, and what were its limits? How did actors such as social reformers, revolutionaries, and religious leaders envision a global public, and how did they try to reach a worldwide audience and mobilize and manipulate global public opinion? And to what extent did a global public opinion actually affect political action, for instance, when it became an object of national rivalry or competition for prestige?

In his opening remarks, Jürgen Osterhammel (Konstanz) positioned the conference in the field of global history, which he considered a particular perspective on framing questions rather than as a special kind of knowledge. Yet globalizing publics is about the globalization of *something*, namely 'flows of knowledge, of norms and symbols, of cultural practices and political models, of debates that

The full programme can be found under 'Events and Conferences' on the GHIL's website <www.ghil.ac.uk>.

used to be limited to more narrowly circumscribed arenas'. Osterhammel suggested testing 'communication', loosely defined, in order to conceptualize what might be called 'globality'. He also underlined that the conveners of the conference do not understand the public or the public sphere as a neutral arena, but, with reference to Habermas, as a space of conflicting normative claims that reflect power relations or attempts to challenge these. But what happens to a public when it turns 'global'? What does this mean for its normative and critical potential? Does a global public have the potential to overcome provincialism?

These questions were addressed in a first conceptual panel which asked whether we should speak of one global public in the singular, or rather, of several competing global sub-publics. Tobias Werron (Bonn) presented a model for understanding global publics as imagined, and only existent for as long as they are addressed. He probed his argument by examining the constitution and role of global publics in the case of international rankings. Ralph Schroeder (Oxford) also questioned the singular by demonstrating that digital technologies do not create a unique global public. He reported from ongoing research on the World Wide Web indicating that not only is access to the internet uneven, but that usage and behaviour also differ both geographically and socially. He underlined that social media (and Wikipedia) are not fully global, not least since in China mainly separate, often state-controlled platforms are used.

A second panel inquired into the 'idioms' of the global public, and took three examples of languages that have the potential to be understood worldwide, namely, numbers, images, and English as a global lingua franca. Martin Bemmann (Freiburg) looked at attempts to create a universal language of statistics in the course of the first World Economic Conference held in Geneva in 1927. Problems on the way to a 'world economic statistics' arose primarily as a result of different national practices of data-collection and the lack of a willingness to implement international agreements nationally. Valeska Huber (London) interrogated the history of English as the 'vehicle of a global public'. Focusing on the inter-war era she traced debates on universal language versus vernaculars, and examined both scientific projects and the practices of simplified languages like Basic English and alternatives such as the picture language Isotype. Photographs, Annette Vowinckel (Potsdam) made clear, need no translation to be

read (notwithstanding different interpretations), a factor that has facilitated their global circulation. She outlined the development of the first photo agencies, tracing their expansion in connection with transmission techniques, particularly Wirephoto. She also scrutinized the agencies' conception of their material as news and their imagination of a 'global visual public'.

Simone Müller (Freiburg) pursued another approach to news agencies. She examined the newspaper empire run by the media mogul James Gordon Bennett, analysing the central role he played in its success, and emphasizing his sense for stories and sensation. But here, too, the company's success relied on the application of the latest transmission technologies and a huge staff of correspondents. Applying new technology on the side of the researcher, Heidi Tworek (Vancouver) demonstrated the opportunities that digital media provide for historical research on global news dissemination. Interrogating the assumption that the USA received almost all of its news from the British during the First World War, she found more than 12,000 articles in US newspapers based on German news up to 1917. This demonstrated the success of the German Transocean Agency's (*Deutscher Überseedienst*) use of wireless technology.

A further panel on the dissemination of news stressed the limits, political control, and monopolies structuring the flows of information. Looking more specifically at the communicative infrastructures and the role of news within the British Empire, Simon Potter (Bristol) interrogated the self-conceptions and structures of the BBC World Service and its forerunner, the Empire Service. Its lofty, self-proclaimed mission to uphold peace and democracy in the world contrasted with a strong commitment to British national interests and a British geopolitical agenda that also reflected its close entanglement with other state and media institutions. Bastian Herbst (Freiburg) looked at Egypt as a nodal point in Britain's imperial telecommunications network. While the British government managed to keep control of the communication system after Egypt became formally independent in 1922, telecommunications occasionally changed from a 'tool of empire' into a tool turned against the British and French empires, when Egypt's new government used the communication system to spread the 'anti-colonial message' far beyond its borders.

The conference then turned from infrastructures controlling the flow of news and information to specific stages and arenas, such as

world exhibitions and the League of Nations. Sophie-Jung Kim (Cambridge) looked at the Parliament of the World's Religions, assembling for the first time at the World Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893. She argued that the concept of 'world religions' underlying this project stressed a universal brotherhood, and was seen as contrasting imperial with materialistic world visions. However, focusing on one of its representatives, Swami Vivekananda, she demonstrated that his projection of Hinduism turned into a political project to revitalize the Indian nation. Vanessa Ogle (Philadelphia) discussed reform initiatives to create a universal calendar as a global instrument, promoted by chambers of commerce, the League of Nations, individual reformers, and governmental agencies. Analysing the failure of such reforms, she demonstrated that different religious groups successfully created a global public sphere to disseminate their criticism.

In a panel that focused on markets and audiences for theatre and film, Christopher Balme (Munich) discussed the global expansion of the entertainment industry between 1890 and 1930 as reflected in theatre-building. With itinerant theatre groups moving around the world, however, theatre managers such as Maurice E. Bandmann, even if they concentrated their tours on destinations within the British Empire, had to cope with highly diverse publics by constantly adapting their repertoire and productions to local requirements. Antje Dietze (Montreal) looked at emerging modern entertainment industries beyond the world metropolises. Focusing on cultural entrepreneurs in the case of Leipzig, she outlined the role of these mediators between global and local cultural economies, stressing their important role for cultural transfer, the creation of new spaces for entertainment, and the development of marketing strategies. Gordon Winder (Munich) took the example of Alfred Hitchcock's thriller *The 39 Steps*, released in 1935, to demonstrate global distribution patterns in the movie industry. Although film was a transnational phenomenon and the producers indeed addressed a global public, he argued that their vision of a global audience contradicted the realities of film distribution in an era of de-globalization, hampered by restricted market access, limited audience numbers, and an emerging global 'film divide'.

The last day of the conference returned to more explicitly political uses of the global public, analysing institutions that sometimes saw

themselves as its representatives. This applied to the International Studies Conference examined by Katharina Rietzler (Sussex). This League of Nations-based Conference promoted international intellectual cooperation to connect national publics and construct a world public opinion in order to influence government policies. While this initiative came to an end in the 1950s, the UNESCO World Heritage Programme gained international recognition during the Nubian Campaign. The World Heritage Programme, Andrea Rehling (Mainz) pointed out, promoted the idea of a 'common heritage of mankind', developed new practices in addressing an envisioned global public, and saw itself as representing a global public. Robert Brier (London) discussed human rights as a new source of symbolic capital in the 1970s and early 1980s. Examining the cases of human rights violations in Chile and Poland discussed in the UN Commission for Human Rights, he showed that nation-states adopted the moral and political language of human rights to gain authority. At the same time, the language of human rights did, indeed, empower NGOs, and even enabled victims of repression to increase their symbolic capital and gain international attention.

With a regional focus on Asia, Steffen Rimner (New York) discussed the reaction of the Japanese Imperial government facing the revelation of the countries' drug trafficking interests. Concerned about East Asian public opinion and the nation's global reputation, the Japanese government ordered the immediate abolition of the empire's 'opium system'. Su Lin Lewis (Bristol) investigated how the idea of a global modernity, visible in fashion and film, was adapted to shape the identities of 'modern girls' and make political claims for women's rights in various Asian countries in the twentieth century, stressing major differences between post-colonial and non-colonial societies.

The concluding discussion proposed several sets of binaries that could be useful to explore the theme further. Willibald Steinmetz (Bielefeld/Oxford) returned to the question of definitions and conceptualizations. Taking up Tobias Werron's idea of an imagined global public, he distinguished between fragmented and unified appeals to the global public. Stressing the interaction between global, national, and local levels, Steinmetz asked whether the public should be conceptualized as a defined group of actors or as a communicative space. He suggested looking in more detail at the role of

law in shaping a global public, and thinking further about counter-concepts such as the private but also the secret, contrasting transparency with opaqueness and concealment. Other binaries that were discussed included simplification and complexity, particularly in relation to the idioms and languages used to communicate, inclusion and exclusion, expansion and limiting factors, and standardization and differentiation. Going back to different stages and arenas of the global public, some participants stressed its fragility and ephemeral nature, as manifested in instances such as the Parliament of the World's Religions, in opposition to an institutionalized and sustained ideal. A further debate centred on the activity or passivity of its 'members' as agents or mere consumers of entertainment or news. Other questions concerned the political agendas of potentially impartial versus manipulated and monopolized versions of the global public.

The conference demonstrated that the existence of a global public is far from self-evident. It particularly shed light on the important role that single actors, international initiatives, and technical preconditions played in its formation; stressed the role of 'gatekeepers'; and identified its limitations resulting from power asymmetries, cartelization, or national separation. Its regional focus lay on the Atlantic world, the British Empire, and Asia, but through a range of case studies, the conference also showed that there is an urgent need to look beyond these areas in order to better understand how a global public was envisioned, conceptionalized, staged, and addressed in different parts of the world.

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