REVIEW ESSAY
By Thor Kerr

American democracy: from Tocqueville to town halls to Twitter, by Andrew Perrin, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2014, ix + 228 pp., US$23.25 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-7456-6233-6

The global public sphere: public communication in the age of reflective interdependence, by Ingrid Volkmer, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2014, vii + 225 pp., US$23.70 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-7456-3958-1

Andrew Perrin's *American Democracy: From Tocqueville to Town Halls to Twitter* and Ingrid Volkmer's *The Global Public Sphere: Public Communication in the Age of Reflective Interdependence*, both published by Polity Press in 2014, offer interesting and varying perspectives on democracy, public spheres, civic identity and media identities. Perrin demystifies the internal practices and institutions of American democracy, offering an optimistic view of the system in the face of voter disenchantment in the twenty-first century. By comparison, Volkmer's work is less interested in re-engaging citizens at a local level than the dynamics of transnational publics. Both books have a shared goal of furthering understandings around the writing of Habermas on public opinion as a sphere of political influence. Between them, this goal is reached in the contrast of their respective examinations into how publics form around changing technologies and practices that enable people to imagine themselves connected in some way. While Perrin concentrates on the dynamics of national democracy within modern America, Volkmer looks well beyond the nation and modernity.

Perrin examines how publicness and democratic citizenship is fostered in the United States, with particular emphasis on technologies of representation: from voting rituals to public deliberation and legislation, from town hall meetings to opinion polling, and from print to broadcast media and social media. In analysing the relations between these technologies and practices, Perrin maintains a careful border around American democracy beginning with his description of significant historical junctures influencing contemporary understandings of democracy. Perrin acknowledges that he provides a partial history of democracy, but ignoring *The Inconvenient Indian* (King 2013) within the dominant colonial perspective risks limiting the book's capacity to further understandings of public spheres. This is the blind spot when Perrin describes how the public sphere operates as a non-violent space, hosting competing antagonistic voices, through which citizen preferences and concerns can be authentically represented, deliberated and, ultimately, legislated. The public sphere or, more precisely, mediated public spheres with imagined boundaries are celebrated, perhaps naively, at the heart of American democracy.

The book's most significant contribution to scholarly debates around publics may come from its analysis of discursive reproduction of American democracy. Perrin argues that citizens' voting preferences and other political engagements are driven by 'their sense of what kind of person they believe they are and want to be' (2014, 77). This focus on voting and other forms of civic engagement as a response to perceived identity runs throughout the book, supporting its overall thesis that democracy is more about culture and representations than it is about politics and social justice. From this position, Perrin asserts that 'public opinion polling really is a democratic practice' (139) despite its clearly evident distortions, such as views of the wealthy being 'represented far more thoroughly and regularly' (138) than those of the poor. Public opinion polling is supposedly good because it 'helps create and constitute publics, and these publics are real, genuine, and democratically interactive' (139).

A similarly problematic argument is offered in relation to the mass media in which the author suggests that concentrated media is enabling for American democracy while the disaggregation of social media is potentially bad for it. Big media is needed to unite citizenry in exchanges of ideas, opinions and emotions in a big nation. Against the threat of fragmented media production through the Internet, Perrin warns it 'remains to be seen whether media and communications technologies can be devised that will be able to support' (162) perception of the common public of American democracy. The perception of common connection within a national community is what needs to be sustained, according to Perrin, not a notion of common wealth.

The book closes with an examination of suggestions for improving American democracy through more transparency and fairer rules of engagement. However, Perrin ultimately dismisses these in favour of a focus on 'technologies, practices, and rules that encourage the formation of true, active publics' (175). For democracy to make sense, Perrin argues, people must feel and act as members of a public. Civic engagement requires thinking of oneself as part of society while citizenship is the set of obligations people bear towards their polity and vice versa, requiring attention on the connections and disconnections between public discourse and state action. Voting is a ritual Americans use to imagine and reaffirm their connection to national community and as thinking individuals. In terms of what people do during the voting ritual depends on how they identify themselves as part of a community. People rarely change their identifications, even when their political preferences do not agree with their chosen party's policies or actions. Perrin describes this as motivated reasoning: 'When we want to believe something, we often search for and choose particular information that will let us believe it' (67). Identity then, not the ballot box, is the real site of politics in American democracy. Perrin contends that 'a decision is democratic if it offers authentic representation of the public's preferences and concerns' (81). The first step in the representation process is citizens learning, choosing and expressing their ideas. Perrin looks to Habermas's description of the public sphere as the ideal space facilitating this expression, but points out that 'never in the history of the United States (or other democracies) has there been a public sphere that actually looks like the open, reasonable, thoughtful, and deliberative space imagined by Habermas' (85). While the author cites an impressive list of theorists to support his arguments, there is the sense that he is skimming the surface. For instance, when Perrin draws on Mouffe's approach to understanding agonistic struggles he does not bring along Laclau's (2005) work on popular reason or gesture towards Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) ethical horizon of radical plural democracy to think through the potential dynamics of overlapping publics. The result is a book that has some rather large holes in reasoning, and employs a positivist rhetoric to paper over them. It is perhaps unsurprising that the book ends with a unifying, patriotic narrative about American soldiers dying overseas. Apparently, *American Sniper* (Clint Eastwood, 2014) can safeguard American democracy through a world-wide web of real and mediated violence.

This requirement for violence at the boundaries of American democracy appears in the final pages of Perrin's book, when it could have been more usefully examined from the outset in linking the narrow public of the Founding Fathers of American democracy with the limits they placed on participation: only white men of property were allowed to represent 'the people' in the young American republic. Perrin describes how voting in the republic was eventually extended to African-Americans and women as the French observer Tocqueville had predicted, with progressive discourses and social movements leading to an expansive notion of popular sovereignty by the end of the twentieth century. Despite the expansion, First Nations people and their relations with American democracy are rendered invisible in Perrin's account; reflecting the persistent structure of settler colonisation (Coulthard 2014). While Perrin discusses the unfinished African-American struggle for recognition of civil

rights, the struggle of First Nations people is palpably missing. In failing to address the 'inconvenient Indian' (King 2013) of American democracy, Perrin seems to have missed an opportunity for a more critical and balanced examination of the relation between American democracy and the global violence emanating systemically from it.

Perrin's partial history of democracy's development in the United States emphasises a gradual inclusion and transformation of 'the people' (30) from a white male engagement in elite group representation in the nineteenth century to a more universal and direct engagement in national democracy in the twentieth. The African-American civil rights, women's liberation and anti-Vietnam movements in the 1960s divided the nation but they also 'endorsed an underlying consensus: that the development, liberty, and autonomy of the individual were the appropriate goal' (35). People were free to engage in influencing the imperfect institutions that governed them. However, this stance begins to jar when the destruction of effective government in Iraq and Afghanistan by American-led wars is justified by the notion that '[i]n both cases, the governments prior to 2002 were corrupt, even brutal' (37). The failure of US experts in turning Iraq and Afghanistan into models of American democracy is attributed by Perrin to locals living 'for generations under antidemocratic cultural systems' (38). While this may be the case, the book would have benefited from a discussion as to whether locals rejected the model practices of American democracy precisely because they were imposed by its invading forces. This would have been a useful litmus test given the book's position that, at least in the United States, the most favourable outcomes are achieved so long as people have public spheres and electoral processes through which they can react and perform the routine rituals constituting their involvement in an American public. For students of political science, the book contains engaging insights into opinion polling, recent electoral events and the constitution of public spheres within America. However, for a more critical examination of media institutions, communication technologies and their relationship with government policy Dahlgren (2009) provides a more successful account of citizens, communication and democracy. Dahlgren's insights into how engagement with changing media technologies may be altering the constitution of public spheres and legitimisation of governance are extended in Ingrid Volkmer's *The Global Public Sphere*. Volkmer argues that public engagement is transnational, 'subjectively assembled across a globalised scope' (2014, 4). Like Perrin, Volkmer sets out to challenge understandings of media and civic identity by drawing on the work of Habermas, but she aims beyond Habermasian theory for an age of transnationalism.

Volkmer draws heavily on Ulrich Beck's concept of reflexive modernity as well as the work of Saskia Sassen and other theorists in weaving together an overview of conceptualisations of transnational extensions of public sphere activism and cosmopolitanism. Early sections in the book resemble literature reviews but latter chapters are fascinating as Volkmer's research on media producers and audiences is introduced to support the complex task of comprehending post-territorial spheres of deliberation and legitimacy. Volkmer sees cosmopolitan moral spheres – in which utterances and other acts are publicly legitimized or delegitimized – emerging from a sharing of globalised civic values interacting with local communication events and technology networks. According to the author, 'cultures of publicness' (72) have developed in diverse ways in different communities in relation to changing media and social technologies. Volkmer argues that these cultures of publicness should not be thought of as Habermas's spheres of rational deliberation but as discursive spheres of imagination constituted by narratives and artistic representations of emotion and particular worldly experiences. People and cultural products move between contingent publics, enabling the transformations evident in the history of aesthetics. These movements suggest it is more productive to think of publics as overlapping assemblages than as rigidly-bound political systems. While Volkmer's description of evolving cultures of

publicness around the development of communications technologies is noticeably Eurocentric, it acknowledges other engagements with technologies of public communication across vast territories over time that provide room for understanding how voices of the Other have been marginalised in colonial cultures of publicness. The legacy of this particular publicness is still felt in Western Australia, where the only substantial daily newspaper continues to frame certain problems and publics in way that successfully solicits state violence and legitimacy for capital accumulation projects requiring more access to Aboriginal territories (Kerr and Cox, in press) despite the operation of an Aboriginal public sphere (Hartley 1997). Volkmer describes newspapers in the United States supporting Eurocentric and big-power perspectives and how this genre can be thought of as a colonial hangover:

> Newspapers in Africa, Canada and Australia evolved at a time when the notion of a trans-border assemblage of interdependence related not only to the domestic and foreign interdependence of emerging European publics – where the dichotomy of domestic and foreign created national identity – but to the context of colonialism where domestic and foreign related to colonial centres and (colonized) peripheries. (81)

The newspaper was a key technology of colonisation because it supported and maintained a culture of public interdependence between European centres and their colonies. Newspapers were used to solicit public support and resources for colonial adventures and to support a sense of 'our' people among readers in relation to colonial and trade competition from other empires. The notion of centre and periphery in this trans-territory culture of publicness was further enhanced by the structure of telegraph networks in the nineteenth century. News agencies supported this centre-periphery communication structure even as territories turned into nations: 'News items were selected and framed from the viewpoint of colonial powers and delivered to clients in colonies and dominions' (82). While the dominant, London-headquartered, Reuters news agency informed its readers around the world of both victories and defeats, 'our' troops were British and the cause was 'right', argues Volkmer (82) citing Donald Read. Despite the proliferation of national news agencies in the 1970s, major international news agencies continue to play an important role in delivering news stories across national borders.

After newspapers and wire services, terrestrial broadcast technology became the dominant media technology that consolidated and supported the rise of nation states. However, this potentially liberating radio and television technology continued to shape 'the relevance of national public life within the dichotomy of centres and peripheries of transnational public interdependence' (84). Radio Moscow began broadcasting in 1920, the BBC's Empire Service followed in 1932, then Voice of America. By the 1960s Moscow Radio was delivering programs around the world in 84 languages. Yet for a time, nation states asserted national sovereignty by regulating their territorial airwaves and domesticating foreign news stories through national news outlets. Broadcast television supported intensely national imagined cultures of publicness, but this sense of national community opened up in the 1990s with the emergence of direct-to-home satellite television, soliciting a sense of public proximity across national boundaries:

> CNN played a dominant role in the first Gulf War by agenda-setting not only in the USA but in various countries worldwide. These new trans-border layerings of direct access and connectivity were not only delivered by narratives but also images… (88)

The growth of satellite television stations, targeting particular themes, has resulted in what Volkmer calls 'post-territorial "layerings" stretching across world regions' (88), enabling viewers to choose between various types of political deliberation. The author shows how there is no longer a spatially proximate relation between audience territory and satellite station location. Audiences are less subjected to common identity construction based on national territory, which is Perrin's great concern. Internet media technologies have also come into play so that audiences – who are now also content producers and curators – are

increasingly identifying with communities across nations rather than with a national community:

> The place-based media influence of the national mass-media age is decreasing and the prime time news which was a collective experience is, in particular among young generations, increasingly replaced by media flows where the subjective linking of communicative forms constitute the sphere of influence. This sphere of influence across interdependent republics is not linear, not rational or transnational, but constitutes a reflective sphere across a transnational interdependent public... (143)

Volkmer argues for a shift in theoretical understanding towards a '*situating* of the subject not only within a pluralist public sphere… but within the lifeworld scope of strategically chosen trajectories of networked communication' (174). In other words, subjects engage with particular discourses according to their particular public horizons in a 'dialectical process reaching not consensus but dialogue' (176). Volkmer suggests we think of ourselves potentially contributing, through a sense of civic identity, towards contingently chosen public horizons rather than of ourselves in fixed relations with stable public spheres. As civic identity extends beyond the national public, people may feel inclined to think beyond peripheral warfare which Perrin provided as the final example of what it takes to maintain the common cultural connection of American democracy.

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