

**Coleman, S., Ross, K. The media and the public. “Them” and “Us” in media discourse.- Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2010. - 199 p.
(Book Review)**

Ryník J.

Pavol Jozef Šafárik University, Košice, Slovakia

In this book Stephen Coleman and Karen Ross describe the current relationship between the media and the public and provide their opinion on what the ideal relationship between the media and the public in democratic society is like. As this relationship is analysed from various aspects, the referring pronouns ‘them’ and ‘us’ given in the title of the book change their object referred as well. Another important feature is that the issue is examined from both, synchronic and diachronic point of view. Both of these features can be seen or inferred from the structure of the book. The book consists of the Introduction, subtitled *Them and Us: Meet the Joe Plumber* and six chapters: ‘Imagining the Public’, ‘Public Spheres’, ‘The managed public’, ‘Counterpublics and Alternative Media’, ‘Virtual Publicness’, and ‘Fractured Publics: Contested Publicness’ which further subdivided into subchapters. The fact that the subchapters are not numbered and some of them consist of sections of text with their own heading may make the book structure seem slightly complex. On the other hand, the text as a whole is so coherent, that all the headings make reading the book easier for readers.

Not only does the subtitle of the Introduction serves as a means to draw the attention, but it also demonstrates the style and the manner in which the main topic is dealt with. The subtitle ‘Meet Joe the Plumber’ which includes a person from Obama’s presidential campaign shows that when analyzing the relationship of media and public, examples were used to support authors’ ideas. Moreover, the ideas embodied by Joe the Plumber are incorporated into a larger historical context when this figure is compared to similar characters in the past. Thus, Joe the Plumber serves as a starting point for the preliminary definition of one of the key term: “He [i.e. Joe the Plumber] is a symbolic embodiment of that which can never be truly embodied, because, by definition, the public is not an entity to be characterized, but a space to be filled in.” [Coleman, Ross, 2010:2] The relationship between media and the public is explained more explicitly in other words: “We argue that the public is always a product of representation. There is no *a priori* public that is “captured” or “recorded” by the media.” [Coleman, Ross, 2010:3] However, it is complicated by the fact that “the mediated public is vulnerable to misrepresentation by media images that fail to reflect its diversity and complexity.” [Coleman, Ross, 2010:5] It is only then that the content of the individual chapters is outlined.

In the first chapter, the public is defined as a social actor and as a social space. These two descriptions of the public are further developed within the separate

subchapters. The idea that there is no predefined public is also stressed in this chapter. [see Coleman, Ross, 2010:9]. Defining the public as social actor, further features of public are provided under the headings ‘The roaring public’, ‘The measured public’, ‘The attentive public’ and ‘The Witnessing public’. Having compared the function of crowds in the Chartist era with its contemporary one, the authors conclude that “for once a gathering expands from a rooted place to diasporic space, it ceases to be a crowd and becomes a public [...]” [Coleman, Ross, 2010:12] Under the heading ‘The measured public’, the claims against public opinion surveys as a means to define the public are provided. The authors defend their claims by the examples from the debate between Obama and McCain and by a short account of the history of opinion polls mentioning other methods of gathering public opinion. Under the following heading, ‘The Attentive public’, the manner of how the members of the public perceive themselves when addressed in political speeches is discussed, accompanied by several examples. Finally the last part under, the heading ‘The witnessing public’, gives examples of how the public is (mis)represented in the new media, particularly in the user-generated-content sites and in the new format of TV programmes, such as reality shows. The authors conclude that despite the latest technology: “claims by media producers to get close to, reflect vividly, or even embody the real cannot be separated from the competing intentions, strategies, and deceptions inherent to this battle to characterize the public.” [Coleman, Ross, 2010:21] When defining the public as a social space, the authors distinguish between public and private space. The fact that these spaces are often overlapping nowadays is also mentioned. Naturally, the authors focus on the public space, within which they describe three features of public space: accessibility as openness to all irrespective of their manner of (self-)expression [see Coleman, Ross, 2010:23], universality in the way that issues relate to everyone [see Coleman, Ross, 2010:25] and visibility which is considered the primary condition under which a the public space can come into existence. Even in this theoretical part comparisons with situation in certain historical periods are provided, which justifies authors’ claims definitions and descriptions of features.

In the second chapter, ‘Public Spheres’, the concept of public sphere is defined and the way how its representation changed over the time from the 18th century to the late 20th century is described. The turn from the public as a homogenous entity to the public that creates its own culture can be observed. Ideally, “in a democracy the public should be more than the addressee of messages from above and afar.” [Coleman, Ross, 2010:41]

In the third chapter ‘The Managed Public’ the attention is drawn to the way how media choose which members of public to focus on and how these members of public are limited in their self-expression. As the authors put it, the aim of this chapter is: “to question the conceptual foundations of long-standing assumptions about which voices most deserve to be heard and to report some empirical findings concerning current media representations of a range of public voices”. [Coleman, Ross, 2010:46] In the

subchapter 'Media as Sacred Space', the authors conclude that while media have control over the production of their content in public space, they have no control over its reception in the private spaces. In the following subchapter 'Cutting the Public Out – the Problem of Source Selection', the attention is focussed on the biased criteria of mainstream media in selecting which members of public they are going to hear. The claims are supported by the results of case studies. In the final subchapter of this chapter, 'Letting the Public In: From Letters to the Editor to Audience Participation' the manner how self-expression of the public is limited by media protocols in letters to the editors, call-ins and studio debates. The examples include research studies, case studies and transcripts.

The fourth chapter 'Counterpublic and Alternative Media' is dealing with the alternatives to mainstream media starting with the definition of the term counterpublic. Then the depiction of counterpublic in mainstream media is illustrated in several examples. In the subchapter 'Alternatives to Mainstream Media', several definitions of alternative media are given. Compared to mainstream media, the editorial decision over what is worth publishing is seen as the most significant difference. In the following subchapters selected kinds of alternative media are described with their advantages as well as challenges they have to face, which is supplemented by real life examples.

The fifth chapter 'Virtual Publicness' is focused on the way how the role of media and the role of public has changed with the advent of the digital age. The authors do not mention only advantages, but the drawbacks are mentioned as well. The subchapter names allow readers track it easily. Accompanying a real life example at the back of each subchapter does not only defend authors' statements, but it also eases the understanding of the key terms.

The final, sixth chapter, 'Fractured Publics, Contested Publicness', is a summary of the publication. However, the issues that have been discussed from the view of media in previous chapters are described from the view of the public.

As it can be observed above, the publication provides an interesting view on the relationship between media and the public. The theory is supplemented with case studies, research results and real practice examples. Moreover, the combination of diachronic and synchronic point of view should also be appreciated. Therefore, I think it is worth reading for everyone interested in media studies.