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## Afterword

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*The distinctions between the public and the private have long been a way of organising the material world, and those distinctions are shifting. This article traces a brief history of the increasingly insecure privacy – both deliberate and not – that is a defining characteristic of our age.*

The distinction between the public and the private has long exercised control over the way in which we construct the material world. We can cite, in the cultural history of Europe, a conception of the public space of politics as the 'polis', a conception which has existed since the fifth century B.C. At the same time, we can also record the ways in which the idea of privacy has dictated the way we have built our houses, planned our towns and indeed organised our imagination. 'Private' thoughts belong to us and us alone, even though they might (and most probably are) the products of the public space. So as I sit and write this in the private space of a university office it occurs to me that in writing this in a room which has a label attached to it telling the world that it is mine, I am in certain important ways inhabiting an increasingly rare and privileged space. I do not mean here simply that I can work in private (a situation which for most people is nowadays a rarity) but that the work which I do remains in my private space until I choose to place it in the public world. I also know that – like many other people – I am unwilling to share my thoughts until I have completed the work which I am producing. Although I know that writing anything on a computer gives it a long and potentially public life I still cling to that same sense of privacy that led Jane Austen to hasten to cover the pages of any incomplete manuscript. At one sound of a creaking door she would hide her work. By the twentieth century Virginia Woolf had become even more demanding of privacy for a woman write: more than the protection of a creaky door, she claimed the right for women to have a room to themselves. Brought up in the patriarchal splendour of the Victorian upper middle class Woolf was very much aware that whilst her father had his study, duly equipped with all the paraphernalia thought appropriate to high Edwardian scholarship, her mother had no such room for which she could claim exclusive use.

These references about the history of women writers and relationship to privacy – or its lack – take us to the twenty first century when composition is assumed to be possible in any space, be it public or private. J.K. Rowling, we are told, wrote her first Harry Potter book in an Edinburgh café. People across the planet are using the public space in exactly the same way as Rowling. They may not be busily writing novels or their essays but those who are not are probably either shopping or surfing the web. They may also be sharing their thoughts on Twitter or otherwise contributing to the voices from everywhere that anyone with access to the Internet can nowadays read. I have to own up to occasionally straying to the *Daily Mail's* web site; my excuse for reading the Sidebar of Shame on that site is that it provides daily ammunition for my view that the policing of women has become no less vigilant than it might have been in any previous century.

The lives of the women pictured and pilloried in the *Daily Mail* demonstrates that we all inhabit an increasingly demanding public space. Any visit to most white-collar work places will reveal a pattern in which it is only the most senior members of that organisation who have offices. I have heard of a UK university which has entirely abolished the idea of private, 'owned' offices for members of the academic staff. This move takes the agenda of privatisation of the universities to new heights: not only are staff increasingly expected to support their own salaries through research grants but the very provision of space in which to work becomes a private responsibility. Very bad luck if you have a small, over-populated house. In other universities new offices for academics may allow individual space, but very often that precious internal space is visible from the outside. What follows from this are the many creative ways in which academics seek to minimise their visibility: curtains, posters, and filing cabinets are used to stop people seeing in. But in that heavily defended office its inhabitants may often seek access to the 'real' world'. Thus they turn to the web to view images of people in moments which might once have been thought of as 'private'. It is not only that aspects of the web show the body (and the 'people' most often seen in states of undress are generally female people), it is that there is a very powerful suggestion that to see human nakedness is to see reality, to see what someone is 'really' like. From the insecure 'private' space of the office individuals seek connection with the 'real' world, a world constituted by an invasion of another's privacy. Although, given that many of the photographs of celebrities on the web are the result of collusion between the celebrity's publicist and the potential publisher of the pictures, the lack of 'reality' is often absolute.

Once upon a time, as Foucault so famously pointed out, it was through the built environment that we policed the behaviour of others. There is no need for the architecture of the panopticon any longer since we have forms of surveillance that are far more extensive than the view from a central building might have been. One way of interpreting this is of course to take the view that George Orwell's vision of the future in *1984* has arrived, that we are nowhere free of the gaze of Big Brother. Indeed, as both crime writers and criminals know, it is almost impossible for a person to disappear in the twenty first century.

So we need to ask what the consequences are for the erosion, for many of us, of any really secure private space. I fully acknowledge those millions who worked – and still work – with no privacy at all. But what has happened to many public spaces, both of work and otherwise, is that all of us have lives which are both surveyed and often impermanent: 'hot desking' does not allow us to make our place of work a miniature home. Given that more of us are living in places where the internal space is limited – it's important to remember that in 1980 Margaret Thatcher abolished the Parker Morris standards about the internal proportions of housing – we might usefully consider the ways, if any, in which changes to our material space are affecting the ways we experience the boundaries of the public and the private.

This paper began with the suggestion that distinctions between the private and the public have been an organising part of western history. Many people have remarked that in the west we are enthusiastic observers of those distinctions. . We do not think that strangers have a right to touch our bodies, we can observe complete silence and social distance even when crammed into close contact and when we visit other cultures we will remark on the much greater physical familiarity between individuals. Amongst western countries, the British are notoriously eager to mark the boundaries of

their houses and fierce disputes can erupt between neighbours whose fences, trees or children intrude into the 'private' space of others.

But as we – like it or not – become ever more subject to surveillance, what collapses is, arguably, not just a personal privacy which we might value but also the wider distinction between the public and the private. One can accept Foucault's thesis of the internalisation of surveillance and assume nevertheless, that this leaves boundaries intact in the world beyond ourselves. What I want to suggest is that the world – in the sense of the cultural and intellectual world that we all inhabit – is rapidly losing its sense of the need to distinguish between public and private.

To illustrate this I will cite two locations where distinctions between the public and the private matter. The first is from politics and the second from what is generally described as popular culture. In the case of politics, there is a longstanding acknowledgement of the close connection between an individual's personal interests (let us say the preservation of their privileges) and their politics. Private interests are legitimated through public discourses and justifications of various kinds. But it was also presumed that those legitimations should bear some relationship – however distant – to public values and public interests. That is, individuals should not 'speak' their politics in the language of the impolite child, the language of 'I want' rather than 'I would like'. But the fierce political battles that are now part of much of the world appear to move increasingly towards this language, eroding the space for truly public discussion. Turning hardly digested thoughts and terrified suspicions into political discourse suggests that the real meaning of 'de-politicisation' is less about the number of people who do or do not vote and very much more about our increasing toleration for allowing our personal furies and fears to become part of the public world.

The unwillingness to distinguish between our personal histories and wider politics is also derived from that problematic inclination, discernible in the UK from the eighteenth century onwards, to 'know' what the great, the good and the not so good are actually like. This curiosity, this need to know about others, owes much of its origins to the cult of the sensational in the eighteenth century. As John Jervis has so convincingly pointed out in his book *Sensational Subjects*, 'sensation' did not begin with the death of Diana, Princess of Wales or other such 'dramatic' events of the twentieth century. On the contrary, sensation was established with the birth of widely available print media. The arrival back in the UK of Alexander Selkirk, the man who became the model for Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, occurred in 1711; Defoe's novel was published in 1719. Selkirk's arrival was a sensation and one which was hugely profitable both for the press and himself and eventually Defoe. People and events became defined as amazing and extraordinary, judgements that became part of the very aesthetic of the nineteenth and subsequent centuries. What, we have to ask, would fashion be like without 'sensation'?

But this hunger for the sensational eats away at the boundaries between the public and the private. Forms of mass communication, together with the sensationally shocking political events of the twentieth century, have fuelled what can be a very profitable appetite. For those of us who live in the UK, the ways in which the British royal family has been discussed in the press provides a very good indication of this change. The classic instance of this shift is that between the complete silence of the British press about the relationship between Mrs Simpson and the Prince of Wales in the 1930s and the hectic enthusiasm with which the press reported the collapse of the marriage of a later Prince of Wales. The pious comments of the great and the good in 1936 at the time of the Abdication covered

the expected moral ground of the Church of England but they also did something more curious: they asserted that the public had no right to know about the private life of a member of the royal family and yet that private life was deemed of supreme importance to the very nature of the public life of the country. How, it was reasonable to ask, might citizens be reassured that their rulers shared their values without knowing about their private lives?

In the case of the Prince of Wales and Mrs Simpson, as in many others at a later date, it rapidly became clear that the on-going secrecy of the lives of the rich and privileged was simply not supportable in an era in which vast media fortunes depended on revealing the private lives of the famous or infamous. To become well known, in whatever context, involved becoming a person about whom it was now legitimate to be curious. What was implicit in this was the view that what people did in the previously private parts of their lives was relevant to their public behaviour. Sexual choices were high on the list of relevance, with financial dealings and networks usually in second place. As *Private Eye* continues to point out, it is absurd to accept individuals in terms of their self-presentation.

The Conservative politicians Jeffrey Archer and Jonathan Aitken are just two examples of people who tried – and failed – to sustain the public versions of themselves that they chose. But in the legal cases in which they became involved (and through which they both found themselves serving prison sentences) they were also implicitly suggesting that their actual private lives, the lives which they did so much to conceal, did not matter very much. These men, of a certain age and class, clearly indicated a contempt for the idea that anyone's private life (and certainly their own) should be governed by the public standards about which, in different ways, they expressed forms of rhetorical support. It is an inclination which could simply be summed up as hypocrisy and a longstanding characteristic of those in power.

Archer and Aitken were both part of the political world, and their antics became a subject for popular culture. In this second location what has occurred is arguably not so much a confusion of the public and the private but the complete disappearance of the private. Celebrity culture has not just eroded boundaries but abolished them. The stages on the way to this conclusion are those of television programmes such as Big Brother and all forms of the cult of celebrity. It is impossible not to suppose that the example set by, let us say, the Kardashian family, does not have some impact on those who follow them. We do not know what actually goes on inside any of the Kardashian households (although planning for the next release of information about their lives must play a significant part in their daily routine) but what we do know is that the public space – and all of us in it – have a new role, that of audience. In this we become the very mirror that Narcissus gazed into so fondly: we, the public, become the collective Big Brother. What this then presents is an interesting question of how we avoid being placed in this position

Yet what I want to suggest, finally, is that by this point in the twenty first century we have come, for all kinds of reasons, to have very insecure and often contradictory views about what actually is private and what is public. We have been given permission to share every thought that crosses our minds with every other person on the planet and in doing so we extend those boundaries of control over others that so worried Orwell and Foucault. Nor is this habit and practice of revelation of the self confined to popular culture: John Bayley, in his account of the last years of his wife Iris Murdoch clearly could not resist using his private experiences as a way of furthering a positive picture of his

public self. The inclination to show ourselves in public is clearly a very powerful force and one that is irresistible whether it is in the polished prose of a Professor of English Literature or the minimal clothing of an actor.

We should perhaps be more careful and more imaginative about what we want to know. It is not altogether a revelation that the majority of women have breasts or that people of all ages and genders will fall over if drunk. We do not need to enforce further censorship of images or of any other kind of material. But we might perhaps consider that in becoming more 'open' we only reveal that we are all capable of acting in self-interest and with hopes of self-glorification. In this we turn the public world into little except a mirror for our desires and our aspirations and hence degrade the function of the public space as one for discussion and debate. The apparent gain of 'transparency' comes with costs, not least the turning away from the potential politics of the public space.

## Author Biography

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Professor Mary Evans is London School of Economics Centennial Professor at the Gender Institute. Her work focuses on the narratives through which we construct social identity, and especially the roles gender and class play in these narratives. The author of many articles and books, Professor Evans is co-editor of *The Sage Handbook of Feminist Theory* (2014) and has published recently on agency, gender and austerity. A new monograph, *The Persistence of Gender Inequality*, is forthcoming.