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Published in:
History of Humanities

DOI:
[10.1086/715945](https://doi.org/10.1086/715945)

2021

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Östling, J. (2021). Circulating Knowledge in Public Arenas: Towards a New History of the Postwar Humanities. *History of Humanities*, 6(2), 649–656. <https://doi.org/10.1086/715945>

Total number of authors:
1

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Circulating Knowledge in Public Arenas: Toward a New History of the Postwar Humanities

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate how a new history of the postwar humanities could be written. Drawing on approaches from the history of knowledge and other adjacent fields, it outlines a study of the conditions of the circulation of knowledge in the public sphere during the 1960s and 1970s. By introducing “arena of knowledge” as an analytical concept, the essay highlights certain media platforms where circulation of knowledge occurred, such as newspapers, paperback series, and early television. All in all, the essay underlines the importance of the humanities for a kind of public knowledge during these years, thereby challenging a crisis narrative of the humanities of the postwar period that is prevalent in established historiography.

This essay demonstrates how a new history of the postwar humanities can be conceived. In the twenty-first century, the history of the humanities has been vitalized through a series of important publications, projects, and conferences, with the journal *History of Humanities* being perhaps the most obvious manifestation. Thanks to all these endeavors, new vistas of inquiry have opened up. One novel approach has been inspired by frameworks developed within the history of science and emphasizes the practices and personae of past scholars. Another ambition has been to reinterpret the changing relationships between the humanities and the natural sciences throughout the centuries. A third source of inspiration has been global history, where the traditional disciplines of the humanities have been related to and compared with non-Western fields of knowledge.¹

However, issues regarding the impact and influence of the humanities in society at large have not been at the center of attention so far. In the current article, by contrast,

1. See, e.g., Paul, *How to Be a Historian*; Krämer, “Shifting Demarcations,” 5–14; Bod et al., “Going Global.”

these questions are addressed analytically. Drawing on approaches in the history of knowledge and other adjacent fields, it first presents a framework that enables an analysis of the conditions of the circulation of knowledge during the postwar period. In the second section, I present concrete examples of what I refer to as arenas of knowledge in the 1960s and 1970s. The essay ends by discussing the general consequences of the proposed shift in perspective for our understanding of the history of the humanities.²

PUBLIC CIRCULATION OF KNOWLEDGE

There are a variety of definitions of circulation of knowledge. A common denominator is that scholars use this concept to dismiss traditional models of linear dispersion.³ In this article, I focus on a particular type of circulation—the public circulation of knowledge.⁴

Public circulation implies that knowledge is studied as a broad, societal phenomenon. This infers that the social reach and relevance of the knowledge under scrutiny are at the core of the analysis. Historical events and phenomena which only affect a few individuals or small groups of people cannot be the starting point for such a study, which means that original innovations and novel findings will be of subordinate importance, while public importance will take center stage. This is in line with a history of knowledge that is an integral part of a larger history of a society.

One way of studying this kind of circulation is to introduce “public arena of knowledge” as an analytical concept. This term can be understood as a place that simultaneously provides opportunities for and limits the circulation of knowledge. It serves as a site where a certain type of knowledge actors and a certain type of audience meet. In order to promote circulation of knowledge in society, the arena must typically have a measure of stability and durability, although the content of the knowledge circulating in one and the same arena may vary over time.

As in all forms of circulation, knowledge does not move freely in an arena. A public arena of knowledge has its own medial and rhetorical norms and limitations that contribute to rewarding and supporting certain types of knowledge, while others are rejected or ignored. Anyone wanting to enter an arena must thus adapt to various rules. There are typically different types of gatekeepers that exclude elements which do not meet the criteria of relevant knowledge, thereby guarding the boundaries of the arena and maintaining its reputation. Of course, this boundary work can result in a negative form of

2. The article is part of the project “Humanities in Motion: Circulation of Knowledge in Postwar Sweden and West Germany,” funded by the Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation.

3. Östling et al., “History of Knowledge and the Circulation of Knowledge,” 9–33.

4. The following sections draw on Östling, “Circulation, Arenas, and the Quest for Public Knowledge.”

exclusivity, but it can also be productive in the sense that it consolidates the character of the arena and gives it a profile that distinguishes it from other competing platforms.

A distinction between an arena and an institution of knowledge can be difficult to sustain. In many cases, however, there is a difference in the degree of formalization or regulation, where an institution of knowledge tends to be part of an established educational system or scientific community. A teacher's training college or a university, for example, are parts of a larger institutional system, where they constitute mutually dependent and cooperating elements within a relatively defined unit. Nor is it possible to establish a boundary between the concepts of arena and infrastructure. The latter, however, is commonly understood as a more basic structure instrumental for a society's communication. A knowledge arena may rather be seen as an element in a larger infrastructure of knowledge.

In addition, an arena of knowledge can, at least for the modern period, be seen as an integral part of the public sphere. This is particularly true if we adopt an understanding of the public sphere as a historically changing phenomenon. Jostein Gripsrud and his Norwegian colleagues have fruitfully analysed the actual history of the public sphere in a specific country, inspired by Habermas's classic *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1962). Gripsrud proposes a broad definition of the public sphere based on what the inhabitants of Norway had in common—in other words, the available space of conversations and experiences forming the political and cultural public discourse.⁵ At the same time, the shared public sphere has always been supplemented by sub- and counterspheres, as pointed out not only by Gripsrud but also by Oskar Negt, Alexander Kluge, and Nancy Fraser. Many of these *Gegen- or Teilöffentlichkeiten* were historically significant and developed alternative thoughts and ideologies that in the long run influenced the wider public sphere.⁶

There are several general analytical advantages associated with the concept of arena. First, it offers empirical concretization to the discussion on the circulation of knowledge; in short, the arena becomes the place where a certain kind of circulation took place. Second, it enables us to see the actors and audiences and how they promoted different kinds of knowledge and played different roles. A third advantage is that particular arenas can be analyzed as components in a larger infrastructure or public sphere. Finally, this concept invites the historian to compare different arenas of knowledge, both diachronically and synchronically.

5. Gripsrud, *Allmenningen*.

6. Negt and Kluge, *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung*; Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere."

POSTWAR ARENAS OF KNOWLEDGE

In what follows, I demonstrate what the circulation of knowledge could look like during the postwar period by discussing four public arenas of knowledge: the paperback, essays in newspapers, television shows, and book cafes. In all cases, I pick my examples from Sweden and West Germany during the 1960s and 1970s.

The *nonfiction paperback series* represented a typical public arena of knowledge during the postwar period. They were crucial channels for academics, journalists, and others who wanted to reach a large audience.⁷ For instance, Rowohlts Deutsche Enzyklopädie published many of the most important books in the Federal Republic and was a tremendous commercial success. Abbreviated “rde,” this paperback series became an important point of reference during the 1960s and 1970s. In total, more than 400 titles were published, spanning a broad range of knowledge but with an emphasis on the human sciences. Many of these books were written by the most renowned scholars of the postwar era. In general, they were sold in great quantities: tens of thousands of copies were not uncommon for an individual book.⁸

Just like in West Germany, paperback books played a crucial role in Sweden for the circulation of humanistic knowledge during the period from the late 1950s and a few decades onward. Both larger and smaller publishing houses invested heavily in the production of paperbacks, not least in special series such as BOC (Cavefors), PAN (Norstedts), and Aldus (Bonniers). The latter was a purely professional nonfiction series with a focus on popular science. Starting in 1957, over 450 titles by both Swedish and international writers were published during the following two decades. A considerable part was made up of prominent scholars in the humanities and social scientists.⁹

At the same time, however, the paperback was not just a simple mediator of academic knowledge. As Philipp Felsch demonstrates in *Der lange Sommer der Theorie*—a truly innovative study in the history of the humanities—it also became part of an intellectual and cultural identity of the postwar period. By placing Merve Verlag at the center of his study, Felsch illustrates how this small but influential West Berlin publishing house came to play an important role in “the theory boom” during the decades of both left-wing radicalism and postmodernism. In this way, he shows what a certain kind of theoretical and political literature meant in a city divided by the Cold War, not only as a source of knowledge but also as accessories in a generation-bound lifestyle.¹⁰

7. Mandler, “Good Reading for the Million.”

8. Döring, *Rowohlts deutsche Enzyklopädie*; Hagner, “Ernesto Grassi and the Reconciliation of the Sciences and the Humanities in rowohlts deutsche enzyklopädie.”

9. Svensson, *Cavefors*; Svedjedal, *Böckernas tid*.

10. Felsch, *Der lange Sommer der Theorie*.

A second arena of humanistic knowledge concerns *essays in the press*. In postwar Western Europe, newspapers offered platforms enabling scholars to publish articles for a broad readership. In a Swedish context, the daily essays in “Under strecket” (Under the line) in the liberal-conservative newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* can serve as an example of a particular kind of arena. Each day, this newspaper published an extended essay, often written by an academic. It could take the form of a review of a new book, a reflection on a contemporary phenomenon, or a portrayal of an artist or a writer. In terms of subject matter, the articles in the 1960s covered a broad spectrum of knowledge, and almost all existing academic fields were represented. However, the majority of these belonged to the humanities, where history, literature, and architecture were particularly well represented.¹¹

“Under strecket” was part of a larger communication circuit comprising universities, publishers, cultural journals, and so on, during the 1960s. By analyzing it as an arena of knowledge for the humanities, we are able to observe this larger context. Furthermore, a promising route would be to relate *Svenska Dagbladet* to one of the major European newspapers. Ongoing research on *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* conducted by, among others, Peter Hoeres and Roxanne Narz in Würzburg, illustrates how this newspaper was a powerful political, cultural, and scholarly factor in the Federal Republic.¹² Such a comparison can shed light on the basic conditions for the circulation of knowledge in two distinctive national cultures.

TV shows as arenas of knowledge provide a third example. As a relatively new form of media, both Swedish and West German television offered a multitude of arenas of knowledge in the 1960s. One significant example is *Fråga Lund* (Ask Lund), an immensely popular television program that began broadcasting in Sweden in 1962. The basic premise was simple: people were allowed to ask questions about any and all topics, and a group of academics from Lund University did their best to provide not only accurate but also entertaining answers.

An analysis of the programs from the 1960s and 1970s reveals that the humanities were well represented. History, philosophy, language, and ethnology were among the most popular subjects on the show. At least half of the academics participating had a background in the humanities and represented a culture of erudition or learning. The overall goal of the circulation was to raise the general level of public knowledge. In the newest form of media—television—classical humanistic knowledge could thus thrive.¹³

11. Östling, “En kunskapsarena och dess aktörer.”

12. Hoeres, “Geschichte eines Leitmediums für Wirtschaft, Politik und Public History”; Hoeres, *Zeitung für Deutschland*. See also Schildt, *Medien-Intellektuelle in der Bundesrepublik*.

13. Östling, “The Audience.”

The fourth example of an arena of knowledge offered a concrete location for interaction and circulation—*socialist book cafes*. The book cafe phenomenon emerged in France and West Germany during the late 1960s and later spread across Western Europe. As a result of conditions that were political, cultural, and dependent on processes in the national book markets, book cafes were soon to gain a foothold within the emerging New Left movement.¹⁴

In both Sweden and West Germany, book cafes are viewed as nodal points within the print culture of the 1970s leftist movement. As shown by Ragni Svensson, they formed important links in a large network made up of producers and distributors of print and other forms of media across the region. Moreover, they aimed to present a site for articulating, circulating and exercising knowledge. Of particular importance was the promulgation of the humanities and social sciences, not only Marxist theory but also philosophy, history, psychoanalysis, and literature. By simultaneously serving as social venues and media distribution centers, the book cafes served as breeding grounds for new political, social, and cultural ideas (i.e., as a kind of knowledge arena).¹⁵

The aforementioned arenas were vital for the public circulation of knowledge in the 1960s and 1970s. This is true for each of them individually, but they were also components in a larger system of societal knowledge.

TOWARD A NEW HISTORY OF THE HUMANITIES

The history of the public circulation of knowledge is not the same as the history of disciplines, researchers, or scholarly communities. As a general methodology, analyses of circulation are related to sociocontextual or cultural-contextual approaches in the last decades, having enriched, for instance, intellectual history.¹⁶ However, by emphasizing the communicative dimensions of the processes of knowledge and putting the public arenas at the center of attention, a different interpretation of the postwar humanities might emerge. In this final section, I highlight how the understanding of the humanities changes when the public knowledge arenas are pinpointed.¹⁷

First, the most obvious effect of the shift in perspective is that the roles of the humanities in society or cultural life become clear. Instead of concentrating on traditional scholarly domains—journals, seminars, conferences—attention is directed toward the public

14. Sonnenberg, *Von Marx zum Maulwurf*.

15. Svensson, "Revolting against the established book market."

16. See, e.g., Stortz and Panayotidis, "Editors' Introduction."

17. In my ongoing project on the postwar humanities, these claims will be empirical substantiated and the circulation of knowledge will be contextualized in societal scales.

sphere. As a result, the contact or interaction zones between the humanistic disciplines and, for example, journalism or the arts become evident. This widens the overall scope.

Second, the new framework means that other actors are drawn to the center. Professors can still be of interest—not as researchers, however, but rather in their capacities as popularizers or public intellectuals. More importantly, however, the spectrum of agents of knowledge is broadened. Journalists, broadcasters, publishers, and bookstore owners emerge as important figures in the history of the humanities. Furthermore, this framework enables us to assess the importance of actors in circulation processes who for various reasons have remained invisible in traditional history writing. This is especially true for women and their role as knowledge actors.

Third, the emphasis on public arenas of knowledge may challenge an established interpretation of the historical development and position of the humanities. The examples of arenas discussed in this essay demonstrate that the humanities were comparatively strong during the 1960s, at least when it comes to their public presence. In histories of the sciences and universities, by contrast, this is a period in modern history when the social and natural sciences expanded greatly in a way that the humanistic disciplines did not. When the status of the humanities within the academic system is portrayed, this is not infrequently done in the form of a narrative of “the crisis of the humanities.”¹⁸ However, an analysis of public knowledge arenas paints a different picture of this historical reality.

Fourth, using the concept of arena, we can discern an era’s larger infrastructure of knowledge, utilizing the concept in a way that has been developed in media history, history of technology, and history of science. John Durham Peters has emphasized that there are both hard and soft forms of infrastructure: railways as well as websites could be seen as infrastructure. In his view, they are characterized by an inherent inertia that helps promote certain forms of path dependency. For infrastructures to work requires someone to manage and maintain them. If this is the case, they can become normalized and taken for granted. It would be worthwhile to explore how the humanistic arenas of knowledge were linked to each other and if they formed an overarching infrastructure.¹⁹

In sum, a focus on public knowledge arenas opens up a new history of the humanities, hopefully a richer and more multifaceted history capturing the significance of the humanities in society, culture, and the public sphere as a whole.

18. Östh Gustafsson, “Discursive Marginalization of the Humanities,” and *Folkhemmets styvbarn*.

19. Peters, *Marvelous Clouds*, 30–33.

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