Small Forms in Circulation (Berlin, 28-30 Nov 24)

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Nov 28–30, 2024
Deadline: Jun 12, 2024

Claas Oberstadt

Call for Papers - Small Forms in Circulation: Infrastructures, Practices, Publics.

Small textual and material forms seem particularly adept at circulating within and between different publics. This conference investigates how the movement of brief, compressed, and otherwise small forms ranging from early modern pamphlets to Instagram stories shape the development of diverse publics, as well as the interplay between them. We propose to explore the relationship between small forms and publics through three related strands of inquiry: how infrastructures affect the circulation of small forms, how practices including remediation enable their circulation, and how the circulation of small forms shapes the formation, operation, and dissolution of public life.

Due to their compactness and tendency to circulate rapidly, small forms accelerate the movement of information in ways that (trans)form both historical and contemporary publics. The development of the bourgeois public sphere as a space of discourse and debate went hand in hand with the historical proliferation of small forms, such as essays and letters, in the early periodical press (Habermas 1962). Building on recent studies on the socio-political role of small forms in the public sphere (Liese & Mohagheghi 2024), we assume a plurality of publics. This allows us to investigate how small forms such as pamphlets, counterculture magazines or hashtags constitute and mediate between different publics. While applying a transhistorical perspective, we are most interested in the 16th-21st centuries, with a focus on how print and media cultures mediate publics from the largest of scales to the small and subcultural.

We envision organising the conference around three topics:

Infrastructures of circulation. Reflecting the recent turn towards infrastructures in media studies, social history, literature, and cultural studies, we investigate the infrastructures and logistics that underlie the circulation of small forms (Hockenberry et al 2021; Richter 2018; Schabacher 2022). Rather than merely focusing on materiality, we position infrastructures as a critical concept, following Adriana Michele Campos Johnson and Daniel Nemser in regarding infrastructures “not so much as a thing but an analytic” (2022, 4). By this we uphold the importance of materiality but suggest to inform this perspective by a semiotic, aesthetic and affective “reading for infrastructures” (ibid., 12). Examples range from early modern pamphlets being distributed through colportage to the flow of mercantile documents within the assemblage of colonial trade, the dissemination of queer zines and travel guides through the postal service and support networks, as well as to the usage of hashtags and hyperlinks within digital networks. Regarding the intersection of

forms and infrastructures, we ask by way of Arjun Appadurai and Vyjayanthi V. Rao (2023): How do small forms and circuits of circulation mutually shape each other? How do infrastructures coordinate the transportation of small forms?

Practices of circulation. While these can include a variety of publication and distribution practices, we want to highlight practices pertaining to (re)mediation (Bolter & Grusin 2000) in relation to small forms. We take a broad understanding of this concept, applying it to any practice through which forms are “re-represented and reused across modes, media, and chains of activity” (Prior & Hengst 2010). Through remediation, small forms become more dynamic and mobile. The satirical pasquinades of early modern Rome, for example, did not stay confined to the statue base they were originally glued to but were passed on verbally by the local population and printed in compilations that found a readership all over Europe. In present times, the rise of digital platforms has led to new possibilities of “doing history”. Projects like @eva.stories and @ichbinsophiescholl remediate diary entries and other documents to present the fictionalised experiences of historical figures in the small formats of social media. Contributions in this category might explore: How do practices of (re)mediation change, in the period between the early modern era and the networked present? And which critical forms can (re)mediation take in countercultures, from colonial resistance to queer communities?

Circulation within and between publics. A third section is devoted to the processes that the aforementioned infrastructures and practices enable. We are particularly interested in exploring the role small forms play in both mediating between publics and constituting mutually distinct publics. Not only can different publics oftentimes be distinguished by their predilection for specific (oral, visual, scriptural) forms (Gestrich 1994). Small forms can be elemental to the construction of publics, and especially of comparatively less-resourced “subaltern counterpublics” (Fraser 1992) that focus on community building and collective worldmaking through zines, elaborate speech and dress codes, or communal performance (Warner 2002). In the digital age, the increasing pluralisation of publics has been understood less as a sign of democratisation than as a worrisome fragmentation and siloing of the public sphere (Habermas 2022). Overshadowing the online proliferation of emancipatory counterpublics, the platform economy has given rise to well-connected “defensive publics” (Jackson & Kreiss 2023) that promote exclusionary far-right politics and are fuelled by the algorithmic privileging of emotionally charged content. At the same time, it is exactly the strong affective charge carried by small forms including rumours and tweets, that, together with the affordances provided by being especially easy to transport and consume, make them particularly adept at transcending boundaries between different publics. Contributions to this section could address questions such as the following: What role can small forms play in establishing or preventing communication between publics? Which affective modes of world-making and world-breaking do small forms take within different publics?

Contributions may engage with the proposed topic through theoretical or methodological approaches, through comparative or individual case studies. We accept submissions from scholars and practitioners. We especially encourage works reflecting on the concepts of "small form" and "circulation" and suggesting fresh perspectives on the role of smallness/compression in circulation, movement, traveling and transmediation of literary and media forms.

The conference will take place from November 28-30, 2024 in Berlin. The language of discussion

is English. The deadline for submissions is June 12, 2024. Acceptance letters in August.

Application process

Standard presentations (about 20 minutes)
To apply, please submit two Word or PDF documents to steffen.richter[at]hu-berlin.de, containing: a preliminary title and an abstract of your contribution (250 words) and 1-2 categories to which your work relates the most: Infrastructures, Practices or Publics; in a separate file, your name and a short bio, stating your affiliation, current research interests and email

Organised by

DFG-funded research group “Literary and epistemic history of small forms”, Humboldt University of Berlin (www.kleine-formen.de)
Gesche Mirjam Beyer
Claas Oberstadt
Marvin Renfordt
Morten Schneider
Anya Shchetvina

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