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Gabriel Tarde's Crowded Publics: Rediscovering the Work of a Forgotten Media Theorist

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Despite a revival of interest in the work of Gabriel Tarde, he remains an underappreciated, patchily translated, and often misrepresented thinker. When he is invoked, it is typically as the "forefather" of actor–network theory, as claimed by Bruno Latour; as the advocate of the power of conversation in media influence, as promoted by Elihu Katz; or as a useful, but inaccurate, citation for comparing rational publics with irrational crowds. This study aims to correct certain misconceptions and broaden knowledge of Tarde's work as a media and communications scholar by focusing on two texts, "The Public and the Crowd" (where anglophone readers have typically relied on incomplete translations) and *Les Transformations du Pouvoir* (which remains untranslated). Tarde teaches us that the media was always social and that the line between physical crowds and mediated audiences was always blurry.

Keywords: Gabriel Tarde, crowds, public, newspapers, Dreyfus Affair, social media

In 1898, a French university professor complained that, because of the rapid spread of a new mode of communication, students were either losing focus in class or simply not showing up at all, confident they could catch up later at a time of their convenience. "The university no longer knows the high turnouts and attentive audiences of the past, with its lecture halls now three quarters empty," he wrote (Tarde, 1898/1901, pp. 27–28). "Most of those who would have been passionately curious to hear a lecture, now say to themselves: 'I'll read it in my paper'" (Tarde, 1898/1901, pp. 27–28).

The professor was Gabriel Tarde (1898/1901), and the quote appears in his famous essay "The Public and the Crowd." While many anglophone scholars will know the essay, they are unlikely to know the quote, as it belongs to one of many passages omitted by Terry N. Clark's (1969) translated collection of Tarde's work, *On Communication and Social Influence*. Clark's collection is justly billed as "the premier guide to Tarde's opus" (University of Chicago Press, 2010, para. 3), which means that—in ways he could have hardly anticipated—his editorial decisions have shaped what English readers know of Tarde (see Borch, 2012, 2020, p. 113; Katz, 2018, p. 51).

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Overall, his translation omitted about half of the essay (usually, but not always, marking his omissions with ellipses). In 2013, *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* published a translation of the essay's concluding 4,000 words that Clark had excluded, but mistakenly claimed that it finally completed the essay, overlooking all the cuts Clark had made earlier in the text—about another 4,000 missing words (Tarde, 2013; Walker, 2013). As a result, anglophone readers of the essay have still been drawing on incomplete information, but with an illusory sense of completion.[1] The new translation was also, unfortunately, riddled with errors (Tarde, 2013).[2]

In the preface to his translation, Clark writes (1969) that translating Tarde is difficult because he was a stylist who loved wordplay (p. vii), but partially translating Tarde poses its own problems: Not only do some of his stylistic flourishes play out over great length, but his writing is full of stray observations, false starts, and divergent paths, and it is often up to the reader to choose what is meaningful. Tarde's essays and books do not follow a single argument or clear structure, but read, as Henri Bergson aptly put it in 1909, "like a series of sudden inspirations" (as cited in Emmanuel, 1969, p. 9). Bergson was not alone in this sentiment. According to an early American reviewer of *Penal Philosophy* (Tarde, 1890/1968), which was first translated into English in 1910,

> books fall into three general classes: those that can be dismissed with a summary, those that demand attentive analysis, those that are so fertile and provocative of ideas as to be almost impossible of summary handling. M. Tarde's book belongs to the last class. (Kallen, 1914, p. 613)

Therefore, in a way that seems peculiar to Tarde, to lose his words is to lose his ideas; an abbreviated essay will struggle to do the original justice.

This fertility of thought is why one is able to find in Tarde the (rarely acknowledged) trace or anticipation of so many famous ideas and concepts: Freud's theories about "mass psychology," which were, according to Henri Ellenberger (1970), simply "those of Tarde transposed in psychoanalytic concepts" (p. 528); Paul Lazarsfeld's theory of "the two-step flow of communication" (see Clark, 1969; Katz, 2006); Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities," for which "he seems to have had no inkling he was repeating Tarde's argument" (Starr, 2021, p. 64); Jurgen Habermas's history of the public sphere (Borch, 2012, pp. 59–60, fn60); C. W. Mills' (1956) focus on the expanding ratio between those who can speak and those who are spoken to through the mass media (pp. 303–304); and, perhaps most famously (and with explicit homage), Bruno Latour's (2002) actor–network theory. "The fault, the

[1] In fact, unbeknown to anyone, a full translation of the essay does exist: in a PhD dissertation by Artemis Emmanuel (1969), "Gabriel Tarde's 'L'opinion et la foule': A Re-Evaluation of Its Relevance to the Sociology of Public Opinion," available digitally at the website of the American University, Washington, DC.

[2] A small sample of its errors include mistranslating "je me hâte de le dire" (I hasten to say) as "I hate to say it" (Tarde, 1898/1901, p. 45; Tarde, 2013, p. 233), "plusieurs des caractères que nous avons notés" (several of the characteristics we have noted) as "several of the people we have mentioned" (Tarde, 1898/1901, p. 55; Tarde, 2013, p. 236), and even "public" as "crowd" at least once (Tarde, 2013, p. 234).

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beautiful fault that everybody envies Mr. Tarde for, is indeed the overabundance of ideas," a reviewer of *Les Transformations du Pouvoir* (The Transformations of Power) wrote in 1899 (as cited in Emmanuel, 1969, p. 10).

For much of the 20th century, however, this "overabundance" existed in obscurity. A towering figure in sociology when he died in 1904, Tarde faded into a puzzling irrelevance. The underlying forces behind this fall—his unsuccessful duel with Émile Durkheim, his idiosyncratic writing style, the quantitative turn in sociology, and more—have been amply covered elsewhere (see Borch, 2012, 2020, chapter 2; Latour, 2002, p. 118; Lukes, 1985, pp. 302–313). Deemed too psychological for sociology and too sociological for psychology, Tarde fell between the cracks. Despite a revival of interest in his work in the 21st century (e.g., Latour, 2002; Sampson, 2012; Toews, 2022; Tonkonoff, 2024), he remains a fringe figure.

This article seeks to contribute to Tarde's renaissance by focusing on two texts that show his pioneering work as a theorist of media and communications: "The Public and the Crowd" (Tarde, 1898/1901), the essay that Clark partially translated, and *Les Transformations du Pouvoir* (Tarde, 1899), a book based on lectures Tarde delivered between 1896 and 1898. With the former, I draw particular attention to passages overlooked by earlier versions of the essay. With the latter, which remains untranslated, I engage only with the chapters where Tarde analyzes journalism. As I will show, both bear the mark of the great political crisis of that time: the Dreyfus Affair, which reached its height in 1898–1899 (Mollier, 2003). It proved the most important and intellectually stimulating moment of Tarde's life and, I argue, transformed his understanding of crowds, publics, and the line between them (Borch, 2012, p. 49, 60; Salmon, 2005; van Ginneken, 1992, pp. 219–224).

Through these two works, and by examining their context, I clarify several popular misconceptions about Tarde, especially regarding his distinction between the public and the crowd and his views on newspapers, but my aim is not only to correct the historical record. It is also to complicate our understandings of crowds and media today by showing, through Tarde, that some of the Internet's purportedly unique features—its dynamic relationship to crowds, its sense of immediacy, its viral spread of fake news—may be less novel than they seem. The article proceeds in four parts. In the first, I describe Tarde's disappearance and renaissance. In the second, I summarize Tarde's life and work with particular emphasis on the Dreyfus Affair, arguing that this is essential to understanding Tarde's most interesting work on the media. In the third, I examine Tarde's arguments in "The Public and the Crowd" (Tarde, 1898/1901). In the fourth, I introduce Tarde's analysis of the media in *Les Transformations du Pouvoir* (Tarde, 1899). In the conclusion, I sketch the significance of Tarde's insights for the age of social media.

Tarde's Disappearance and Renaissance

It is the fact that Tarde was such an influential and esteemed scholar at his death in 1904 that makes his subsequent disappearance from academic debates over the 20th century so surprising. He was appointed professor of philosophy at the Collège de France in 1900, and he entered the prestigious Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques the following year (Clark, 1969, p. 7; 1973, p. 192). He was recognized

internationally as one of the great thinkers of his generation. Hippolyte Taine described him as holding "the key which opens almost every drawer" (as cited in Barrows, 1981, p. 152). Robert Park (1904/1972), one of the founders of American sociology, drew heavily on Tarde for his dissertation, *Masse und Publikum* (Crowds and Publics), before he went on to pioneer the field of collective behavior in Chicago. A preface to an English translation of one of Tarde's books, published by Macmillan in 1899, begins, "It goes without saying that no introduction of M. Tarde is necessary to English and American readers versed in sociological discussions" (Tarde, 1897/1899, p. viii).

Then, around the 1920s, at home and abroad, Tarde all but vanished. By 1961, he could be described as a "forgotten sociologist" (Hughes, 1961). He had fallen into "an inexplicable oblivion," Jean Millet wrote in 1970 (as cited in Leroux, 2018, pp. 2–3), as "a shroud of silence settled over his work." Over the past few decades, the oblivion has been somewhat explained, and "the shroud of silence" has lifted. In 2000, the Revue d'Histoire des Sciences Humaines devoted an entire issue to him (Borlandi et al., 2000), and, from 2002 onward, Bruno Latour galvanized interest in Tarde by heralding him as "the forefather" of actor–network theory (Latour, 2002, p. 117; for a critique of Latour's appropriation of Tarde, see King, 2016).

Nonetheless, Tarde remains understudied and underappreciated. In most introductory textbooks on sociology or sociological theory, he receives either a passing mention (O'Byrne, 2011; Ritzer & Murphy, 2020) or no mention at all (Nehring & Plummer, 2013; Orsini, 2024; Plummer, 2021). In the field of media and communications, Tarde's absence is even more striking. It is hard, if not impossible, to think of any scholar of his generation who was as interested in how the means of communication shape society. In his translated collection, Terry Clark (1969) heralded him as "one of the most perceptive commentators in the practically untouched field of mass communications and their effects" (p. 54), but many introductions and readers on media and communications act as if the critical academic study of the media began with the Frankfurt School (e.g., Bengtsson et al., 2024; Ott & Mack, 2014; Thornham et al., 2009). In Anthony King's (2016) recent survey of Tarde's usefulness to sociological theory—which claimed to cover "the central points of his philosophy" and found them wanting—there is no mention at all of Tarde's analysis of media and communications (p. 47). Even in Sergio Tonkonoff's (2024) more generous *Reintroducing Gabriel Tarde*, Tarde's interest in media is peripheral (chapter 5).

Tarde's marginalization means that even when he is invoked, it is often in two-dimensional form: as Latour's (2002) sidekick (Couldry, 2020; Hagen, 2022); as the extoller of the power of conversation in media influence (Katz, 2006; Katz et al., 2014); as a useful, but inaccurate, citation for comparing rational publics with irrational crowds (Butsch, 2008; Mongo, 2025; Stage, 2013). He rarely seems to be read in his own right, and when he is, it is only narrowly. Even Elihu Katz (2018), who has done more than anyone to champion the importance of Tarde in the field of media and communications, has admitted that, while he has read Tarde's essay "Opinion and Conversation" "line by line" with students, he is "only casually acquainted with most of the rest of his writings, except for the translated excerpts and discussion in Clark and secondary sources" (p. 51).

It would be tedious to list every time Tarde has been misrepresented, but a few examples will suffice. Richard Butsch (2008) suggests that, for Tarde, "an audience of readers . . . was considered rational,

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in contrast to a theater audience crowd that was considered emotional. Reading would trigger discussion rather than riot" (p. 13). For David Toews (2022), Tarde's public "is understood as a refuge of cool, responsible rationality in contrast to the heated irrationality of crowds" (p. 64). Relatedly, Paul Starr (2021) writes that "Tarde was not disturbed" by the growing power of the press and that it was only later, "particularly after the development of cinema and radio broadcasting," that theorists would "become more worried about the power of mass communication" (p. 9). Carsten Stage (2013) deems Tarde's work less relevant now that social media platforms "blur the clear boundaries between a mediated public and an unmediated crowd, private sphere and public life, geographical distance and perceptual proximity, the body as an entity and the collective life of bodies" (p. 3). Similarly, Cleves Nkie Mongo (2025) has argued that online activism and digital protests

> blur the line Tarde once drew between the public and the crowd. For Tarde, the public was dispersed, spiritually connected by newspapers, while the crowd was emotional and physical. But in today's digital age, that divide is less clear. Networked communication allows publics to act as crowds, and sometimes even become them. (p. 494)

The irony—or tragedy—is that Tarde's work teaches the exact opposite of such statements. For him, reading and rioting were never mutually exclusive; the notion of the rational and independent reader was a fantasy; and ever since the rise of mass-circulation newspapers, the line between the mediated public and the physical crowd—between reading the news and feeling the bustle of other people—has been fuzzy. Tarde noticed a similar blurring of categories through the media, a similar experience of immediacy and sociability, a similar collapse of distance, in his time. In what follows, I expand on Tarde's contributions to media analysis, after first giving a brief summary of both Tarde's life and the most formative political crisis he experienced, the Dreyfus Affair, where crowds and media combined like never before.

Tarde and the Dreyfus Affair

Gabriel Tarde was born to an aristocratic family in 1843 in the small French town of Sarlat. Although he lost his father when he was eight, he once described an eye disease that afflicted him between 19 and 25 as having "the most profound—fatal? beneficial?—influence" on his youth (as cited in Emmanuel, 1969, p. 37). It meant that he "read very little and thought a lot," he said, and made his youth "rather sad" (as cited in Emmanuel, 1969, p. 37), but it also seemed to alert Tarde to the contingencies of perception: that how we see shapes what we see and, therefore, what we believe. As he wrote more than once, "What is seen stops us from contemplating what cannot be seen" (Tarde, 1898/1901, pp. 47, 25–26).

Despite early forays into poetry and literature, Tarde made his name as a scholar in criminology, opposing the theories of the then-dominant Italian school, which effectively claimed some people were born criminals (Barrows, 1981, p. 138; Tonkonoff, 2014). Tarde, in contrast, emphasized the importance of social factors over biological ones, arguing that questions of individual agency and human nature were complicated by the intense influences of modern society. In *Laws of Imitation* (Tarde, 1890/1903), perhaps his most famous book, he argued that most forms of social behavior, including crime, take place through the unconscious imitation of others. In *Penal Philosophy* (Tarde, 1890/1903), published the same year, he considered the implications on the judicial system: Once the

causes of crime are accepted as social, what is a just punishment? In 1894, in recognition of this work, he was appointed as director of the criminal statistics bureau at the Ministry of Justice, and he moved to Paris (van Ginneken, 1992, p. 195).

Tarde arrived in the capital just in time for the Dreyfus Affair, which shook France over the next five years and shaped the direction of Tarde's research (Salmon, 2005). To understand how and why it affected his thought so deeply, and why it provided such fertile material for thinking about crowds and publics, a brief summary is necessary. The affair began in early 1895 when Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish Frenchman of Alsatian origin, was found guilty of espionage and exiled to Devil's Island, but as evidence of his innocence emerged, France split into opposing camps: Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards. It became a heavily mediated conflict and spectacle. The Dreyfusards had *L'Aurore*, in which Émile Zola would publish his famous open letter to the president under the headline "J'accuse" in January 1898, which sold up to 300,000 copies that day (van Ginneken, 1992, p. 217). The anti-Dreyfusards were led by Edouard Drumont, a fervent anti-Semite and prolific journalist, through *La Libre Parole*, which sold up to 500,000 copies a day (Salmon, 2005, para. 8; van Ginneken, 1992, p. 210). "At the height of the Dreyfus Affair, in January–February 1898, almost no one was able to escape this deluge of information," the media historian Jean-Yves Mollier (2003) writes (para. 5).

The other major protagonist, besides the press, was the crowds. What the painter Félix Vallotton heralded as "the age of paper" (Mollier, 2003) was also, as Gustave Le Bon (1895/2001) famously declared in his bestseller *Psychologie des Foules*, "the era of crowds" (p. 14). The 1890s were a decade of disruption, crisis, and agitation (Weber, 1986, p. 128), and the affair was arguably its most dramatic chapter. As printed material peaked, riots did too. Wilson (1973) describes January and February 1898 as "the high-point of active popular involvement in the whole Dreyfus Affair," with over 60 riots in 55 places, usually fueled by anti-Semitism (p. 789). Print sometimes provoked the riots and helped them spread. Zola's (1898) article, first published in Paris, is considered one of the major catalysts for the violence. It was illustrative of the new dynamics of print that the worst rioting and anti-Semitic attacks happened almost a thousand miles away in Algiers (see Arendt, 1942; Wilson, 1973, p. 803). Newspapers also became targets in themselves. Wilson (1973) notes how in towns like Lille and Perpignan, there were demonstrations at the offices of local newspapers that were deemed too sympathetic to Jews (p. 795).

Tarde was, like the better-known (and more reactionary) Le Bon, one of the pivotal figures in the emerging field of "crowd psychology," a new pseudoscience that sought to analyze the political turmoil of the era and that tended to pathologize protest and socialist agitation as a form of collective insanity (Barrows, 1981; van Ginneken, 1992). However, as Louise Salmon (2005) has shown, the affair contributed to "a rupture, or at least a turning point in Tarde's perceptions of social phenomena relating to crowds—a turn from a penal to a sociological perspective" (para. 1). Before the affair, as Ernesto Laclau (2005) has written, Tarde's work on crowds "repeats all the shibboleths of early crowd theorists" (p. 41). Through the affair, as we will see, it becomes far more nuanced and incisive.

There is also a shift in how Tarde sees newspapers. In the *Laws of Imitation* (Tarde, 1890/1903), Tarde mentions newspapers briefly and generally with optimism, even anticipating a future world where newspapers will publish statistics with such speed and accuracy that they become a new social organ, like

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"the eye or ear," providing essential information for our survival "just as the ear-drum is a bundle of acoustic nerves, or as the retina is a bundle of special nerves each of which registers its characteristic impression on the brain" (p. 134). Through the Dreyfus Affair, however, Tarde begins to articulate a much more pessimistic view of the press that focuses on its destabilizing effects on politics and the complicated relationship between journalists and their readers. Tarde's famous essay "The Public and the Crowd" (1898/1901), which was completed at the height of the Dreyfus Affair and includes at least a dozen references to it, marks this shift in perspective.

The Public and the Crowd

In 1898, Tarde published his essay "The Public and the Crowd" as an attempt to bring terminological precision to growing debates about the crowd:

> Not only is the crowd attractive and fascinating to the observer, but its very name exerts an extraordinary effect on the modern reader, and so many authors are much too inclined to designate by this ambiguous term all kinds of human groupings. (Tarde, 1898/1969, p. 277)

The essay's most important distinction is between crowds in general, understood as in-person gatherings, and publics, defined as dispersed readers who are united in their shared engagement with the news. Tarde (1898/1969) maintains that casual readers, who peruse a newspaper only for notices that are personally relevant, are not part of a public: They need to be "seized" by a story (p. 288). "The strange thing," Tarde (1898/1969) writes, is that these people "who are swept along in this way . . . are all sitting in their homes scattered over a vast territory, reading the same newspaper" (p. 278). It is the growing significance of this mysterious grouping, free from any physical contact, that Tarde (1898/1969) identifies as "one of the most clearly marked traits of our period" (p. 277). "I therefore cannot agree with that vigorous writer, Dr. Le Bon, that our age is 'the era of crowds,'" he writes (Tarde, 1898/1969, pp. 280–281). "It is the era of the public or of publics, and that is a very different thing" (Tarde, 1898/1969, pp. 280–281).

If this group is physically separated, Tarde (1898/1969) asks, "what then is the bond between them?" (p. 278). It lies not in the newspaper itself, Tarde (1898/1969) argues, but in readers' "awareness of sharing at the same time an idea or wish with a great number of other men" (p. 278). At this point in the essay, Clark's translation includes an early ellipsis that omits about 900 words, where Tarde elaborates on the nature of this shared awareness. While the reader "hardly suspects the influence exerted on him by a mass of other readers," it is precisely this shared awareness that both distinguishes newspapers from novels and makes even yesterday's newspaper seem so stale. The reader knows that his peers have moved on (Tarde, 1898/1901, p. 4). "We say to ourselves that we are the only ones reading it, and this is enough," Tarde writes (p. 4).

In a striking analogy, Tarde (1898/1901) even likens the difference between reading yesterday's newspaper and reading today's as between "a speech that one reads at home compared to a speech one listened to while in the midst of a crowd": One experience is quiet and private; the other is noisy and interactive (p. 4). From this observation, made at the very start of the essay, we can already see that, for

Tarde, crowds and publics are not opposite extremes: Newspapers enable a new type of group dynamic that, in its immediacy and imagined unanimity, simulates certain crowdlike feelings. What fascinates Tarde the most is not how publics differ from crowds, but how they can be so similar even in the absence of physical copresence.

This highlights another misconception about Tarde's work. He has been anointed a forefather of "the theory of mass society," which argued that new forms of mass communication were making society increasingly atomized, vertically organized, and un-interactive (Giner, 1976, p. 60). In fact, Tarde sees newspapers as a new form of social bond, a new type of connectivity—imagined, perhaps, yet nevertheless real and consequential. It is from this imagined connection, between reader and reader rather than reader and writer, that a great deal of the newspaper's pleasure and power derives.

The crowdlike characteristics of publics are not, in Tarde's estimation, intrinsic to the nature of print. While the public first emerged in Europe with the rise of printing in the 15th century, it was only in Tarde's (1898/1969) time, the late 19th century, when "three auxiliary inventions—printing, the railroad and the telegraph—combined to create the formidable power of the press," that publics acquired "that feeling of immediacy and awareness of simultaneous unanimity without which the reading of a newspaper does not differ essentially from the reading of a book" (p. 280). It was at this moment, in other words, that reading became a social activity, which people could do together from the privacy of their own home. Only then, through the proliferation of mass-circulation newspapers, could the public eclipse the crowd as "the social group of the future," precisely, that is, when the public began to approximate the crowd in its dynamism and intensity (Tarde, 1898/1969, pp. 280–281).

The consequences of newspapers on physical crowds are multifaceted. While they stoke and goad new types of crowds, they also make crowds less necessary: When newspapers are ubiquitous, the need to go outside and be copresent declines, according to Tarde, because it becomes possible to follow events without "being there." Even when you are there, he continues, the need to pay attention is less pressing than it was "before the printing house, when the consequences of inattention were irreparable" (Tarde, 1898/1901, pp. 26–27)—hence the problem at university lecture halls, quoted in the introduction: distracted students and fewer of them. Tarde (1898/1901) speculates that if all newspapers suddenly ceased printing, the crowds for "professors and preachers, in cafes, clubs, salons and lecture halls, as well as theaters," would suddenly expand and "behave everywhere more noisily" (p. 26).

Tarde (1898/1901) is conflicted, even contradictory, on how positive he sees this shift from crowds to publics. On the one hand, he repeatedly suggests that it is one of progress: Publics are "more tolerant," "more intelligent and more enlightened," he writes (p. 38). On the other hand, he continually introduces caveats, ultimately arguing that while publics pose fewer dangers than crowds, their negative qualities play out over longer periods and become more insidious. Abe Walker (2013) is incorrect when he writes that "if the first half of the essay obeys a binary logic, presenting the crowd as a force of evil and the public as its antithesis, the second half [sic] casts doubt upon this simplistic binary," referring to the newly translated fragment (p. 229). The truth is that Tarde is ambivalent throughout. Contrary to how many scholars discuss Tarde's ideas, it is clear that the rise of the public, and the power it bestowed on newspapers, made him uneasy.

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Crowds and publics have many differences. Crowds are limited and shaped by their physical setting, the reach of the human voice, the weather, and the need to disperse eventually. Publics, by contrast, are capable of an "indefinite extension" across time and space (Tarde, 1898/1969, p. 280). Crowds may be more intense: The influence of fellow crowd members and a public speaker is stronger than that of fellow readers and a writer, and whereas one often belongs "simultaneously to several publics," one can only belong to "one crowd at one time," which explains "the far greater intolerance of crowds" (Tarde, 1898/1969, p. 281). Crowds are also easier to deceive than publics, according to Tarde (1898/1901), because "people are more gullible when gathered together than when taken alone" (p. 54).

However, Tarde resists any simplistic distinction between the rational reader and the irrational crowd member. Tarde (1898/1969) acknowledges that the newspaper reader might have more "intellectual freedom" than the individual "swept up in a crowd": They can reflect "in silence"; they can put one newspaper down and pick up another if they so choose (p. 283), but he sees this freedom as mostly illusory. Journalists and editors are always testing what will play on their readers' "prejudices and passions"—"circulation figures and subscriptions are excellent thermometers, which are often consulted"—with the hope of building a "docile and credulous" audience, whom the newspaper "can easily direct with a few concessions to their prejudices" (p. 283). These appeals to prejudice might be less intense than those made in a crowd, but they are more drawn out, embedding them deeper into readers' minds. "The man of one book is to be feared, it has been said; but what is he beside the man of one newspaper!" Tarde warns (p. 283). "This man is each one of us at heart, or nearly so, and therein lies the danger of modern times" (p. 283).

This is why, in another passage omitted by Clark, Tarde (1898/1901) suggests that the power of popular journalists might exceed that of popular public speakers. In its longevity, the journalist's power is more reminiscent of Louis XIV than of a modern politician, whose careers seemed increasingly precarious and short-lived (p. 20). According to Tarde, it is this peculiar power, at once pervasive and immaterial, that makes the press so hard to regulate and its offenses and crimes—spreading lies, fomenting resentments, inciting violence—so hard to punish: "It would be as if one wanted to regulate the sovereignty of the Great King or Napoleon" (Tarde, 1898/1901, pp. 20–21). Tarde's royal analogy has an ironic intention. He argues that while the "flatterers of crowds" insist that "the historic role of individuals is destined to decline" amid the rise of democracy and the decline of monarchy, in fact it is the era of publics—the very social form that coincides with democracy's ascendancy—that offers powerful individuals "the greatest opportunities to assert themselves" and individual opinions "the greatest opportunities to spread" (Tarde, 1898/1901, p. 21).

No event crystallized the dangers of publics—and the way they combined with crowds—more clearly than the Dreyfus Affair. It was one of those moments when "an overexcited public" spouted "fanatical crowds" and revealed the public to be "a potential crowd" (*une foule virtuelle*; Tarde, 1898/1901, p. 12). Tarde cites it as evidence of how a hateful public can actually pose a "far greater" danger than "the ravages of furious crowds" because "it's more penetrating rage accumulates and sustains itself over months and years" (p. 48). Whereas Le Bon (1895/2001) argued that newspapers simply gave crowds what they wanted—"the writers have lost all influence, and the newspapers only reflect opinion"—Tarde sees a more dynamic relationship between the press and the public's prejudices

(p. 172). The master of this dark art, for Tarde (1898/1969), was Edouard Drumont, the anti-Dreyfusards' leading polemicist and anti-Semite, who successfully forged the public's prejudices into collective identities that could manifest in violent crowds. Drumont did not invent anti-Semitism, Tarde (1898/1969) argued, but through his journalism, he fused what had previously been "purely individual, with little intensity and even less contagion, unaware of itself," into "a collective force, artificial perhaps, yet nonetheless real" (p. 282). "I know of areas in France where the fact that no one has ever seen a single Jew does not prevent antisemitism from flowering, because people there read antisemitic papers," Tarde (1898/1969) wrote (p. 282).

In the essay's final pages, omitted by Clark, Tarde even extols the positive effects of crowds—utterly original for its time—as if to further emphasize his ambivalence toward publics. Festival crowds, where people are "drunk simply on the pleasure of gathering for the sake of gathering," perform "one of the more necessary and salutary social roles," promoting "peace and unity" and counteracting "all the wrongdoings of other types of gathering" (Tarde, 1898/1901, p. 45). As a result, Tarde writes (1898/1901), "crowds rarely deserve the criticism that people, including myself on occasion, have said about them" (p. 45). He criticizes "the sociologists' typical severity towards crowds" and explains it by returning to a favored formula: "What is seen stops us from contemplating what cannot be seen" (Tarde, 1898/1901, p. 45). What Tarde means is that the negative effects of crowds are easier to perceive than their positive effects. Whereas the "spectacles of criminal destruction" that accompany hateful crowds are all too visible, the positive effects of adoring crowds are essentially invisible: They are "hidden in the heart's fold, where, long after the festival finishes, they . . . are expressed in a thousand imperceptible ways" (Tarde, 1898/1901, p. 47).

It should be clear from this summary that Tarde's essay entails no distinction between the rational public and the irrational crowd. There is no clear line between crowds and publics that—as many scholars would have it—only becomes blurry later, through the rise of the Internet and digital crowds. Tarde (1898/1901) reminds us that even when media operated primarily in one direction—that is, when readers had no immediate way to either respond to a journalist or interact with fellow readers—there can still be profound connections among its audience, created by the mutual awareness of simultaneous engagement, even though the individual reader "hardly suspects" how important this awareness is.

I now turn to *Les Transformations du Pouvoir* (Tarde, 1899) to broaden awareness of Tarde's work on newspapers.

Les Transformations du Pouvoir

In 1899, Tarde published *Les Transformations du Pouvoir*, a book that drew on two lecture series he delivered on "political sociology" between 1896 and 1898, at the École Libre des Sciences Politiques and at the Collège libre des Sciences Sociales (Tarde, 1899, p. v). Terry Clark's (1969) collection contains a short six-page excerpt, "On the origins and functions of elites" (pp. 245–251), but otherwise it is entirely untranslated. As is typical of Tarde's oeuvre, the book covers a vast array of subjects. Here, I focus only on his analysis of newspapers. If "The Public and the Crowd" (Tarde, 1898/1901) is primarily concerned with the nature of a newspaper's readership and the links between the readers, *Les Transformations du*

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Pouvoir is more interested in the nature of a newspaper's power and the links between the writer or editor and their readers.

The analysis is remarkably prescient. Tarde sees how the press does not simply provide information but also creates a desire for more information—a desire that the press alone can satisfy. That desire is so strong, he argues (Tarde, 1899), that the press will only grow more powerful even as people come to trust the press less:

> No matter . . . how awareness of the press' corrupt bias grows, its power persists and even spreads because it answers the need for more information, for a quasi-alcoholic mental stimulation, that spreads far quicker and more intensely than the contempt for journalists. (p. 43)

Tarde is already seeing, in that alcohol analogy, how a society could become addicted to news.

The power of the press has paradoxical consequences on power. At one level, it weakens the authority of governments and their politicians because even when the press is not pursuing radical or revolutionary ideas, it undermines the "mysterious authority" of those in power by disclosing political secrets, challenging government's claims, and treating its officials as objects of gossip (Tarde, 1899, p. 53). At another level, however, the press bolsters the position of the powerful: first, by expanding the means and reach of political messaging, and second, by turning politics into a deceptive spectacle that pacifies the public.

In the first case, Tarde (1899) argues that because of rapid advances in modes of communication, and contrary to many excited (and fearful) claims about rising democracy and socialism, "the gap between the number of leaders and the number of followers is constantly widening" (p. 14). Whereas in antiquity, Tarde writes, 20 clan leaders or speakers could govern a city of 2,000 citizens—"a ratio of 1 to 100"—"now, one can govern 40 million people with only twenty committed or bribed journalists": "a ratio of 1 to 200,000" (p. 14). Indeed, for Tarde, the press inaugurates an "inverse progression of prestige and power": The mystical basis of authority declines as the means of enforcing authority increases (p. 53). The result is new asymmetries of power—"the space between the man who seizes the moment and the multitude who acclaim him"—that will continue to "grow enormously" (p. 218). "We can therefore predict with certainty," Tarde writes, with ominous accuracy, "that the future will see personifications of Authority and Power beside which the great despots of the past—Caesar, Louis XIV, and Napoleon—will pale in comparison" (p. 219).

In the second case, to show how the press turns politics into a deceptive spectacle that dazzles and distracts the public, Tarde (1899) invokes by way of metaphor another 19th century innovation, the stereoscope: a set of goggles that show a different image in each eye to create the illusion of a 3-D world (they were a popular form of entertainment and wonder in their day; see Crary, 1990, pp. 116–118). The passage is worth quoting in full (Tarde, 1899, p. 53):

> The newspaper is a daily stereoscope in which politics shimmers before the eyes of the public, under the name of news. Its frequent repetition embeds and generalizes the need for this spectacle, and extends everywhere the notion that Power is a superior sport to be played with the primary aim of being interesting. Ruinous, disastrous, *so be it*; so long as a government keeps its spectators in a state of suspense, so long as it interests them, it can be sure that even the slightest success will be applauded.

Clearly, Tarde's thinking about media and communication has changed since the *Laws of Imitation* (Tarde, 1890/1903), where he depicted newspapers as society's version of the human eye. The newspaper is no longer a medium for transmitting facts, but rather for projecting illusions: not an eye, but a stereoscope.

For Tarde (1899), mastering "the art of journalism" was now essential to the conduct of power, just as mastering rhetoric was once essential for the great leaders of Ancient Greece and Rome (p. 233), but while oratory was subject to endless treatises, Tarde tells his contemporaries that "we already have the right to be surprised that no such treatise has appeared despite more than a century of feverish journalism" (p. 233). Tarde provides a provisional outline of what such a treatise might look like, pending this new art's formulation "by an Aristotle of our time" (p. 237). It is worth reading—and translating—in full, but here I will summarize some of its insights.

There is one big difference between ancient oratory and modern journalism, according to Tarde, and it comes down to attention. All the treatises on the art of rhetoric assume a group of listeners who have already gathered and are "shielded from all other ambient influences"; it is the orator's task to assemble them into "a single state of mind" and conjure "a collective dream" (Tarde, 1899, pp. 232–233). The task of the journalist, or newspaper, is very different. Their potential audience encounters the news "amid all kinds of distractions"—buzzing conversations, frivolous entertainments, rival journalists—and so the "great difficulty, which the ancient orator never foresaw, because it did not exist, . . . is how to attract attention [and] form the audience, whereas treatises on rhetoric always start from the assumption that one's audience is already there and listening" (p. 235). How to form an audience? "The simplest and best-known method is to scandalize people, or even to frighten them with some fake news (*fausse nouvelles*) or a cynical exaggeration of actual news," Tarde writes (p. 235).

The next challenge, having formed an audience by grabbing their attention, is to retain it while also pushing the paper's partisan agenda. The key, Tarde (1899) writes, is "incessant repetition" of certain themes, ideas, and villains while also covering "an innumerable and incoherent set of subjects" (p. 235). The newspaper thus also "busies itself with literature, history, science, and philosophy," but "always while interposing the prism of its passion in between" (p. 235). Eventually, Tarde argues, the reader begins to inhabit a mediated world, and he

> sees nothing, neither in the present nor the past, that is not refracted and distorted, and from these deceitful visions of things he builds a notion of the world that is essentially false, but systematic, and that produces an unconscious yet irresistible impulse towards a certain goal. (pp. 235–236)

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Different newspapers might approach their shared partisan agenda in different ways, "dividing the work of captivating their public, some by providing more nourishing fare, others by serving it sweets, each responding to readers of different ages and classes" (p. 236). In all cases, the aim is continuity. Tarde likens a single article to a single phrase in a speech "that lasts months and years" (p. 233).

Once again, Tarde (1899) invokes the Dreyfus Affair to explain his pessimistic view of the press. "There is no other story where the press has deployed such a consummate and potent skill in keeping the public in a state of suspense, of stoking it daily, through the steady accumulation of ingenious inventions," he writes (p. 154). It showed "that anything that tends toward civil war, or even foreign war, is favorable to newspaper sales" (p. 154). He criticizes all those who blame the affair's frenzy on France's supposed moral decline or on the rise of mass suffrage, when "all the advances in communication" were decisive. It was, more than anything, "ravenous and avidly-read newspapers" that let "the question of Dreyfus' innocence or guilt divide the whole country"; otherwise, "this affair would have remained a legal matter" (p. 154).

Overall, in *Les Transformations du Pouvoir* (Tarde, 1899), Tarde provides a sophisticated, if polemical, analysis of how the various commercial and political imperatives of newspapers—attracting new readers, keeping old ones, and promoting a set of interests—combine to make them a destabilizing, and at times disorienting, force in politics and society. Many of Tarde's arguments foreshadow what generations of media scholars will argue over the next century and beyond: that the media turns politics into a distorted spectacle that enthralls the public; that the media does not simply give readers "what they want," but shapes those wants and forges them into political identities; that the media thrives on stoking divisions in its bid to grab and hold the attention of readers. The notion that Tarde saw the rise of newspapers and the reading public as a uniformly rational shift in society is a total distortion of his arguments.

Conclusion

This study has sought to broaden knowledge of Tarde's work on media and communications and to correct a bundle of misconceptions about his distinction between publics and crowds. Tarde's distinction is far murkier than many make out—even murkier than Tarde sometimes makes out. He sees the public as plural, porous, and contradictory: It is not the opposite of a crowd, but an evolution of it and an addition to it, rational and irrational, physical and virtual, filled with conflicting potentialities. Tarde's crowded publics are not places where the best argument wins, but rather realms where newly mediated allegiances, prejudices, and identities form and spread and where new forms of power play out.

Tarde had many faults: His depictions of crowds often draw on racist and sexist tropes, and his books and essays often conclude with some version of the "great man" view of history. Whereas his limitations were mostly typical of his time and class, his gifts exceeded them. His original curiosity led him to focus on mediated audiences when so many of his contemporaries were obsessing over in-person assemblies. On this ground alone, Tarde could feasibly be considered the first media theorist: the first scholar to devote singular attention to communication technologies as transformative social tools.

Recognizing Tarde's work is not only of interest to scholars hoping to trace the evolution of ideas or understand the media of the past, it also helps us understand media in our own time. Social media is widely seen as having a special relationship to crowds: Not only are social media users discussed in the language of virtual crowds—as social media mobs, witch hunts, pile-ons, and so on—but the platforms themselves are considered uniquely suited to mobilizing physical crowds (Dean, 2016; Gerbaudo, 2012; Kaplan, 2021; Tufekci, 2017). It has been suggested that social media is the first communication technology to exist in such a dynamic relationship to crowds. "Bright lines once separated being alone and being in a crowd," author and technology commentator Nicholas Carr recently said (Thompson, 2025, para. 25). It is a sentiment that, as the quotes at the end of section 1 show, many scholars seem to share, but Tarde refutes this notion.

Tarde's work suggests interesting parallels between the rise of mass-circulation newspapers and the rise of the Internet: Both coincided with a popular belief in democracy's growing ascendancy and the dawn of a new age of crowds; both threatened old hierarchies of power and created new ones; both evoked fears of inciting a false sense of unanimity; and both catalyzed, or at least became closely associated with, a profound sense of political instability. However, to read Tarde's reflections on mediated crowds is not to conclude that nothing has changed. It is possible for a line that was already blurry—such as that between crowds and publics—to become blurrier still.

Through social media, after all, what connects the mediated public is no longer simply the simultaneous psychic awareness of other people, but the possibility of real, direct, and immediate interactions through digital platforms. We encounter nearly everything online through a web of reactions and interactions: likes, shares, short comments, and so on. These interactions are not identical to those that take place within a physical crowd—they are mediated and incentivized by private companies and technological affordances that align with corporate interests—but, in their coordination and affective intensity, in their shared ability to disinhibit our behavior, they justly evoke the analogy (Davies, 2018; J. Dean, 2016; M. Dean 2017). People say and do things in crowds that they would not do in one-to-one or face-to-face encounters—and the same applies to social media.

While the discussion of social media mobs and digital crowds continues, the mediated crowd remains both undertheorized and underhistoricized. Tarde's analysis of crowds and publics is where any analysis of mediated crowds must start.

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