Seminar 7, The Public

* 18th c. = the time when science became public

1. Access to science (**How**?):

* Salons (hosted often by elite women, but usually attended by both men + women). Places where learning + knowledge held high value.
* Coffeehouses
* Lectures
* Erotic literature
* Poetry
* Societies
* ‘The Gentleman’s Magazine’
* Literature
* Franklin: ‘electrical party’
* The (quack) Temple of Health + Hymen = popular treatment of the ‘Celestial Bed’ (a bed of electric vapours) that aimed to tackle barrenness.
* Public squares + salons = lecturers demonstrated powers of electricity with their portable apparatus.

*Wider Group discussion:*

* Madame Lavoisier’s salon:
* Stimulated + directed discussion, using her knowledge of her husband’s work or of her translations of latest scientific progress in England.
* Newspapers:
* Less elite form
* Accessible to all, as they were cheaper.
* About more than science, so they provided a common entry to sciences.
* Displays on street corners + public squares = electricity (new discoveries + experiments of sparks + shocks).
* Museums
* Nurseries + childhood literature

1. **Why** was science becoming popular?

* Electricity’s popularity in the public sphere = attributed to ‘the instrument trade, the marketing of cultural products, the sociability of electrical experiments.’
* Priestly (latter half of 18th c.): it was regarded as a ‘natural agent’ that accounted for ‘unusual appearances’ (lightning, earthquakes, whirlwinds).
* Demonstrations that proved this = aided the construction of an ‘electrical cosmos’ (health, sickness, natural disasters = results of electric fire).
* Inclusion of human body in demonstrations = more interactive + fascinating + aroused curiosity.
* Attitudes towards participating in electrical experiments:
* Exhilarating
* Required one to ‘pluck up […] Courage’
* Visual display of the powers of nature.
* Habermas: science was not becoming embedded in only the physical sense; it was also ‘established in the mind, as an ideological force and a prized ingredient in the approved cultural diet.’
* Growth in Enlightenment’s cultural spaces for discussion.
* Via discourses of poetry, philosophy, religion+ politics.
* Medical electricity = another innovation that brought electricity to the forefront of public interest + discussion.
* Newly discovered electric fire = viewed by patients as a possible healing agent.
* Patients would sometimes undergo ‘therapeutic’ shocks in performances.
* Experiments were easier to do, with household items.

*Wider Group discussion:*

Why would an ordinary person gravitate towards science?

* New discoveries, such as electricity = enlightening science that fascinated society.
* Enlightened science = evidence of *progress*.

1. **Who** had access to science?

* Polite Society
* Schiebinger: a handful of ladies gained admittance into Republic of Letters.

**Who did not** have access?

* Via discourses of poetry, philosophy, religion+ politics.
* Illiterate population could not access books + literature.

*Wider Group discussion:*

* Those with poor education had limited access = a class issue (depending upon which form of discourse is being referred to: books, literature, elite societies + organisations)
* Women:
* Predominantly took a role of ‘spectators’ + not ‘participants’
* However, the aristocratic woman was also key in gaining favour + patronage.
* If a woman was lucky, clever or of a high social status = more likely to gain admittance.
* But, altogether, they generally were not wanted to be a part of the key enterprise.