

Disenchantment and Deliberative Democracy

Jurgen Habermas inspired a generation of media scholars with his work on the public sphere. By grounding the history of political discourse in the architecture and social history of the space of communication, he underwrote an array of approaches to the problems of media systems. His impact went well beyond what his initial audience, as his work was taken up by feminist critics, media reformers, the public journalism movement, and students of the internet. Meanwhile, as an active public intellectual, he has been an important commentator on the many changes in especially the European scene in his lifetime. So the essay at hand is an interesting specimen. It displays Habermas's strengths as a thinker, while also showing the modesty of his intentions and the limits of his willingness to embrace a more activist position.

The task Habermas embraces in this essay, first presented as a keynote at the 2006 ICA convention in Dresden, is to establish a connection between normative and empirical research on the public sphere. He is aware that his audience consisted mostly of communication scholars. His comments might be usefully contrasted with Wolfgang Donsbach's Presidential Address from the same convention. (Donsbach, 2006) Donsbach praised advances in scholarship on media effects and argued that it will allow for the more effective operation of the public sphere. This is not Habermas's argument: he is relatively unconcerned with effects research. Instead, he appeals for empirical research that examines "the necessary conditions for the generation of considered public opinions" and that uncovers "the causes of communication pathologies." (416) One might argue, though Habermas does not, that a chief cause of "communication pathologies" is the very science of media effects that Donsbach extols. By demystifying the processes and effects of political communication, empirical research into public opinion encourages political actors to treat public discourse with instrumentalist cynicism; by shredding the regulative fiction of the intelligent public, empirical research removes the anticipation of punishment for lying and being stupid.

Habermas begins his argument by making the case for a deliberative model of democracy, and then identifies two conditions required for media to promote healthy deliberation. The first condition is relatively simple: media independence. The media need first to be free from state interference in the form of censorship and propaganda. They also need to be free from coercive power in civil society: they must not be controlled by malefactors of great wealth, for instance. For Habermas, as for any thinking individual, Silvio Berlusconi exemplifies the failure of independence on both levels. One is hard-pressed to maintain that the Italian public sphere is healthy. Nevertheless, can one say it's more dysfunctional than the US media system, which has made a fetish of both its independence from the state and of the independence of its journalists from the business concerns of its owners?

Writing in 2006, Habermas could not avoid mentioning the failure of the US press to challenge the Bush Administration campaign to win public support for the war in Iraq. Habermas calls this a failure of "counterframing." (421) He laments what he calls a "temporary dedifferentiation" (421) of journalism from the state, but considers it a lesser problem than the structural capture of the Italian press. There is good empirical research that suggests that the "dedifferentiation" of the US press is not at all "temporary," but that it is rooted in news practices that index press coverage to official discourse. Is it significant that the US pulled Italy into Iraq, and that Italy pulled out before the US? Does it mean that a media system characterized by a high degree of integration into the political system actually offers more opportunities for counterframing?

Habermas's other necessary condition is a bit more elusive. The media can support public deliberation "if anonymous audiences grant feedback between an informed elite discourse and a responsive civil society." (412) The implication is that such feedback can be blocked by the sorts of science that makes the audiences no longer anonymous, and here he misses an opportunity to indict the sort of empirical research that Donsbach has praised.

The availability of trusted techniques of measuring the effectiveness of political messages

makes it much harder to have intelligent discussion of political issues. What happens to debates over the tax code, for instance, when framing experts using focus groups assure political actors that they can kill proposals by using the term “death tax?” Whether that conventional wisdom is true or not, all parties to any subsequent debate come to honor it as scientific, and collaborate in distorting the deliberation to accommodate it.

In his book *Googled* (2009), Ken Auletta tells the story of Mel Karmazin's visit to Google headquarters to discuss their advertising system. Karmazin, then head of Viacom, was invested in a model of advertising in which messages were sent out over mass media with uncertain effects. Google offers a system where the impact of a message on an individual user can be monitored, and where advertisers can be charged only when a message actually draws in a customer. Karmazin's comment on this brave new world was memorable: “You're f**king with the magic!” What he meant by “the magic” was the belief of advertisers in both the power of media advertising and in the unknowability of the precise workings of that power. That's the magic that makes people pay a zillion dollars for a SuperBowl spot.

Research into the political effects of media messages disenchant—f**ks with—a different magic. Habermas cites research on the state of political knowledge among ordinary folk, and, although he notes that there's much to be unhappy about, nevertheless accepts the argument that people are still able to reason effectively in spite of their apparent ignorance. We can choose to be reassured by that, but the evidence from our political discourse shows that the real political actors aren't buying it. They believe the experts who tell them how to manipulate ignorance and fear in the electorate. They believe that they can defeat national health insurance by calling it a “government takeover.” They believe that they can target specific voting blocs with specific talking points. They believe that complex arguments can be extraordinarily dangerous in offering opponents the chance to take elements out of context and demonize them. And they know that the press will exaggerate any storyline because that's what “neutral” journalists do.

In brief: the smarter political actors have become about the ways in which public opinion forms in the media sphere, the more they cultivate a process of deliberation in which one is rewarded for lying and being stupid. The “magic” of the public sphere was that actors believed that an intelligent supervising public would punish you for lying and being stupid. That magic is f**ked, and the science of political communication is one of the things that f**ked it.

None of this is new. Although specialists like Donsbach can cite specific issues on which the scholarship of political communication has made significant advances, to critical scholars, the broader state of the art seems to revolve around problems identified half a century earlier. Habermas's own critique of the media system here and elsewhere fits comfortably within the boundaries established by C. Wright Mills' *Power Elite* (1956), published fifty years before the convention in Dresden.

But what about the digital revolution? It is no longer accurate to focus on the “mass media” that consumed the attention of Mills and his generation. Habermas has little to say about new media in this essay, though he does note obliquely the challenges that the changing media environment posed to traditional political journalism, which he called “the centerpiece of deliberative politics.” In 2006, the blogosphere was new, and filled with counterframing; it looked to be central to successful challenges to both Berlusconi and Bush. A few years later, a skeptic might think that Habermas was prescient to ignore it.

But we expect new norms of public communication to follow from social transformations, especially as they re-code new media technologies. It's not safe to make predictions, of course, but one could argue that the present moment represents just such a confluence of social transformation and new media technology. We can follow a large body of scholarship and call the social transformation “neoliberal,” and we can speculate about its fit with digital networks. Habermas usefully taught us how to think about the age of print and the age of television; he has not yet led us in elaborating the challenges and opportunities of deliberation in the network public sphere.

References

Auletta, K 2009. *Googled: The end of the world as we know it*. New York: Penguin.

Donsbach, W. 2006. The identity of communication research. *Journal of Communication* 56(3): 437-48.

Mills, CW. 1956. *The Power Elite*. New York: Oxford University Press.