

After Habermas:  
The Revival of a Macro-Sociology of Media

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## I. INTRODUCTION

My thesis today is that there has been a significant revival, over the last decade and a half, of sociological research that attempts to map and explain the dynamics of broad media environments – call them what you will -- mediascapes, media fields, media systems, or mediated public spheres.

My thesis, or really hypothesis, because this needs to be tested with a more systematic quantitative content analysis of sociological journals and books, is that this movement toward macro-studies of media systems represents a revival in a different register of the neo-Marxist critical political economy school of the 1970s and 1980s, which were then eclipsed by ethnographic and so-called active audience studies from the mid-1980s through early-1990s.

This revival of a macro-sociology of media has multiple wings, and certainly not all of them can be traced back to Habermas, as the title of my talk suggests. Other social scientists and social theorists have contributed to this revival, including Manuel Castells, William Gamson, Pierre Bourdieu, Jeffrey Alexander, Daniel Hallin, and others.

However, I do want to argue that Habermas has played a crucial role in catalyzing and legitimating a new wave of sociologically-inspired research on media, and the relationships between media and other cultural, political, and economic institutional actors.

So in this talk, I want to briefly address the following:

First -- What has Habermas contributed to media sociology? And to what extent and in what ways has his conceptual apparatus – chiefly the concept of public sphere – been adopted by sociologists studying media?

Second -- What are the crucial gaps or conceptual problems in Habermas's original empirical model of the public sphere?

And Third – To what extent do Habermas's new “public sphere” model, Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, and American new institutionalism help us to build an even more nuanced, critical macro-sociology of media?

## II. HABERMAS'S CONTRIBUTION

With the English-language publication of a short encyclopedia essay on “The Public Sphere,” in 1974, and *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1989, Jurgen Habermas brought his considerable symbolic capital to the study of media. However, the full intellectual impact of these works was not felt immediately.

Habermas is almost ignored in the *Annual Review of Sociology* articles devoted to media from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. In review articles by Holz and Wright in 1979, McQuail in 1985, and Gamson et al. in 1992, Habermas is not mentioned once. Only in

1997 – eight years after the English-language publication of “Structural Transformation” – does the situation begin to change. In an Annual Review article on “Politics and Culture” published that year, Mabel Berezin prominently mentions Habermas (along with Bourdieu and Foucault) as “setting the research agenda of scholars who focus on macro-level social change.” Berezin noted in this 1997 article (p. 366) that “empirical work on the public sphere is just beginning to emerge.” Since then, Habermas and/ or the concept of the public sphere have been cited and discussed in a 2001 Annual Review article on “Social Implications of the Internet” authored by Paul DiMaggio et al; in a 2004 Annual Review article on “The Production of Culture Perspective” by Peterson and Anand; and most recently, in a 2006 Annual Review article on “Video Cultures” by Grindstaff and Turow.

*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* has been amply discussed elsewhere, but I want to emphasize that the book helped open or re-open two important lines of inquiry – one normative, the other empirical.

The normative debate concerns the role of proper role of media in democracy, or at least the range of proper ideals for a truly democratic media. In Craig Calhoun’s edited volume *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, and elsewhere, there has been a fruitful engagement between Habermas and feminist theorists such as Nancy Fraser.

In my view, however, the real flowering and development of this normative debate has come in more recent works such as the Myra Marx Ferree et al’s *Shaping Abortion Discourse* (published in 2004), and C. Edwin Baker’s *Media, Markets and Democracy* (published in 2002).

Both works offer a comprehensive categorization of normative theories of media and democracy – of which Habermas’s original “discursive” or “republican” ideal is only one. Ferree et al. emphasize competing, mostly non-overlapping models. Baker – similar to James Curran – emphasizes the need to bring together diverse normative ideals (for inclusion, deliberation, civility, critique, etc.) into one overarching model. For Baker, in fact, Habermas’s new normative model, outlined in *Between Facts and Norms*, embodies an ultimate, hybrid ideal of “complex democracy.”

Habermas’s account of the rise and fall of the western public sphere, however, also puts itself forward as an empirical model – and it is this aspect that I want to emphasize more today.

A quick look at Amazon shows a flurry of recent books with Public Sphere in the title: *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*; *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*; *Media and Public Spheres*, a just out edited volume; *Ethnic Minorities, Electronic Media, and the Public Sphere*; and likewise in the sociological and communications journals. On another level, Al Gore also extensively cites Habermas in his recent book, *The Assault on Reason*.

In most of these cases, however, the term “public sphere” is used more as a rhetorical token than as a way to systematically organize research. One notable exception is a 1984 *Theory and Society* article by Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini, who contrast the “empty”

public sphere of the U.S. with the “full” public sphere of Italy (“full,” that is, of diverse political parties and civil society groups). They use these structural contrasts to help explain why U.S. television journalism is more interpretive and narrative-driven than Italian TV journalism, during that period. But few subsequent public sphere studies have offered this kind of structured empirical analysis.

In short, Habermas’s early “Public Sphere” encyclopedia article and *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* have prompted a vigorous debate that continues to this day. These works helped broaden the interest in media beyond the realm of communications and media studies departments, either reviving (as in the case of sociology) or catalyzing (in the case of political science, perhaps anthropology) new research in media across the academy. The notion of public sphere provides a widely known, legitimate theoretical framework that allows a new generation of media researchers to speak to one another across disciplines and specializations. And that is no small accomplishment.

But the question I want to focus on today: What more can we do to move beyond the close readings of the Habermasian sacred texts, and really use – or at least build upon Habermas – to analyze the problems and potentials of actually existing public spheres?

### III. PROBLEMS WITH EMPIRICAL PUBLIC SPHERE THEORY

In his introduction to *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (p. 38), Craig Calhoun writes: There is ‘a need for analysis of [the public sphere’s] internal organization, something almost completely neglected in *Structural Transformation*... whatever its qualities, any public sphere is necessarily a socially organized field, with characteristic lines of division, relationships of force, and other constitutive features.’

Likewise, Bernhard Peters (2002, p. 4), the late close collaborator with Habermas, wrote: ‘In his pathbreaking study on *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas did not make sufficiently clear what those structure [of public deliberation] were. [There is a need] to delineate basic features of the public sphere, as a precondition for the study of their change or transformation.’

In short, we need to ask such questions as:

- What is the empirical structural organization of the public sphere?
- How do public spheres vary, across nations or regions?
- And what are the complex links between structural characteristics of public spheres and the form and content of mediated discourses?

I’d now like to move quickly to three general kinds of theoretical solutions that have been proposed to such questions.

The first is Habermas’s own solution, his latest reformulations of public sphere theory.

The second is Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory.

And the third is American “new institutionalism” – closely related to field theory, but with a greater emphasis on the structuring role of the state – which in turn calls into question a key assumption of both Habermas and Bourdieu – the ideal of media or journalistic autonomy.

#### IV. THREE EMPIRICAL MODELS OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

##### (A) ‘New’ Public Sphere Theory

In his 1996 book, *Between Facts and Norms*, and in his 2006 keynote address to the International Communication Association in Dresden, Germany, Habermas offers his most updated empirical theory of the public sphere. This model, as Habermas acknowledges, is strongly influenced by the work of Bernhard Peters.

In these most recent formulations, Habermas emphasizes two aspects of national public spheres – first, their potential openness to civil society associations, and second, the degree to which media systems (which constitute the heart of the public sphere) are autonomous or “self-regulating” – a point to which I want to return in a moment.

Habermas sees democratic societies organized according to principles of “center” and “periphery.” The public sphere is at the periphery of the political system. It plays a crucial role as a “sluice-gate” to bring progressive and emancipatory ideas from the outer periphery of civil society into the center of the political system. This model emphasizes the important democratic functions of civil society and social movements. It raises important research questions, such as: How do media and political systems vary in their degree of openness to the periphery? However, other than this question, Habermas is not so much interested in the “center.” And in fact, even in his new public sphere model, Habermas does not change his underlying Weberian assumptions about the corrupting character of rationalized, bureaucratic systems. To the extent that this is true, it’s difficult to see what will ultimately prevent the bureaucratized political system from co-opting or destroying whatever emancipatory impulses originate from the periphery.

##### (B) Bourdieu’s Field Theory

How do we get beyond this impasse? Bourdieu gets us part of the way there by offering a radically different conceptualization of the sources of democratic renewal and intellectual emancipation.

Habermas and those influenced by him tend to see institutional power – the bureaucratically-rationalized system -- as the problem. In this worldview, the “system” is the problem, while the “lifeworld” is the solution.

Like Habermas, Bourdieu values highly the power and justice of the “better argument,” defending the Enlightenment tradition against postmodern relativism. But unlike Habermas, he does not ground this position in intimate interpersonal relations, in the lifeworld. Rather, influenced by Durkheim, Bourdieu validates the very institutions – or

at least some of them -- that Habermas disparages. Reasoned argumentation and civic virtue are socially produced, and thus far from advocating a romantic retreat from society (toward the supposedly more authentic, loosely-organized peripheral associations), one is encouraged by field theory to build and defend institutional walls in defense of creative and especially scientific autonomy. In what Bourdieu has called his “*Realpolitik* of Reason,” he contrasts his position directly with that of Habermas: “If there exist, pace Habermas, no transhistorical universals of communication, there certainly exist forms of social organization of communication that are liable to foster the production of the universal” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* [Univ. of Chicago Press] 1992, pp. 188, 190; see also Poupeau, 2000).

Likewise, in a perceptive essay in the edited volume *After Habermas*, Nick Crossley writes, “Bourdieu subverts the Habermasian distinction between strategic and communicative action by seeking out the structural conditions of fields which make ‘communicative rationality’ strategically viable.” Crossley continues: “Journalists (and artists and scientists) are only rational and critical ... to the extent that they are constrained and have incentives to be so.”

Where Bourdieu is rather vague, however, is on the question of where these constraints are going to come from. Both Bourdieu and Habermas defend journalistic autonomy – journalists constraining journalists. Habermas advocates a “self-regulating media system” – that operates “in accordance with its own normative code” (ICA address, p. 19); Bourdieu favors a more autonomous journalistic field, that is, a space in which journalistic excellence is defined according to purely journalistic criteria, not by profit-maximizing or political criteria.

The problem, though, is that journalists defining for themselves what is good journalism are not necessarily going to buy into the other parts of the Habermas and Bourdieu programs. Habermas wants journalism to keep an open door to civil society. Bourdieu wants journalism to give a greater voice to social scientists and critical writers and artists.

Do journalists want to play their part in promoting deliberative democracy? In fact, most U.S. journalists rejected the public journalism movement of the 1990s, which aimed precisely to put the ideals of Dewey and Habermas into journalistic practice.

Do journalists want to play their part in promoting social scientific knowledge? In fact, as Elihu Katz wrote in his perceptive 1989 essay, “Journalists as Scientists,” journalists operate according to implicit theories of action and causality – a voluntaristic theory of action, especially emphasizing the actions of prominent business and political leaders, and an emphasis on events over long-term processes – that directly contradict most of the accumulated insights of the social sciences.

If journalists are ever going to take up the cause of a more civil-society or academic-oriented mediated public sphere, they will need to be constrained to do so. At least in part, this constraint will need to come from the democratic political system – the State.

And yet, Bourdieu has surprisingly little to say about the state and media policy. Habermas is even quick to condemn any media system incompletely differentiated from

the political system. He not only attacks the extreme case of media under Berlusconi's Italy (an easy target!), but also criticizes the supposed "paternalism" of the Italian public service model that preceded Berlusconi. And yet the evidence is growing that it is precisely those media systems that are more closely intertwined with political systems – that is, linked to political parties and other political groupings in society (or in the U.S., the more alternative political media) – it is precisely these more politicized media that produce the kind of news and commentary that most closely approximate the ideals of deliberative democracy (on this point, see, most recently, Rohlinger 2007).

Just as an interesting commentary on this point, I would refer you to a 1981 essay by Jeffrey Alexander appearing in a book edited by Elihu Katz. In this essay, Alexander compares the historical development of the French and American press, and in general, he staunchly defends the virtues of the more "differentiated" American media against the less de-differentiated French press – less de-differentiated, that is, vis-à-vis the political system. However, Alexander also makes this important concession:

"Theorists from Aristotle to Marx and Weber have emphasized that the achievement of intellectual insight proceeds most effectively along a dialectical path, through a head-on dialogue of opposing perspectives. It appears that the conditions for such a dialogue occur only in those societies in which the news media is less rather than more differentiated [that is, less differentiated from the political system], for only in relatively undifferentiated situations do the mediums produce sharply divergent perspectives of public events ...."

On the other hand, Alexander continues, the higher the media differentiation – as in the case of the United States – the lower the "sharpness of public thought and the quality of intellectual insight available to the society at large." Alexander goes on to note that this problem is due not only to American journalism, but to the structure of the American political system as well. To be fair, then, it is not just a question of the media; however, media policy and the level of politicization of the media are clearly factors shaping the "quality" of public sphere debate.

In his contribution to the edited volume, *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*, Michael Schudson offers a powerful critique of any simple defense of journalistic autonomy. He even-handedly notes that journalism in democratic societies must remain open to a variety of external influences, both market and political (as well as academic and activist). But I would suggest that the problem of journalistic autonomy is a bit more lopsided. It's clear that journalism has lost most of its autonomy vis-à-vis the market. The flip side of this, though, is that journalism has gained too much autonomy vis-à-vis the democratic state – that is, the state acting on behalf of various publics to defend and promote forms of journalism that are currently underproduced by market forces. The question, then, is how do we right this imbalance? It's not just going to happen by itself.

### (C) New Institutionalism and the State

To finish out this survey, then, this is where New Institutionalism comes in – and where New Institutionalism – in dialogue with Habermas and Bourdieu – offers the best means both of empirically specifying the public sphere and just as importantly suggesting how the public sphere can work better to achieve democratic ideals.

By new institutionalist media research, I mean such works as Timothy Cook's *Governing with the News* and Bartholomew Sparrow's *Uncertain Guardians*. I would also include under this rubric, Hallin and Mancini's *Comparing Media Systems*, even though they do not draw as extensively on the general new institutionalist literature (e.g., Dimaggio and Powell) as do Cook and Sparrow.

Finally, I would include the recent book by Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media*. Starr's entire narrative of the creation of the U.S. media is infused with the new institutionalist insight that market structures are shaped by state policies. And thus, the particular shape of the U.S. media market can only be understood in light of crucial policy choices that political actors have made at crucial junctures in U.S. history. There is nothing inevitable about the current structure of U.S. media. It could have been otherwise. (See also Schudson 1994).

In short, the New Institutionalists help us see what is sorely lacking in most of the public sphere empirical literature: the State.

What are the laws and regulations and tax breaks and subsidies – in short the rules of the game guaranteed by the state through democratic political processes – that nudge and prod and encourage journalism to more closely meet ideals of deliberative democracy? The public sphere does not exist apart from the state and the political system. It is fundamentally structured and shaped by state policies and actions and political traditions. These vary from society to society, and these variations very likely make a difference. But how? Therein lies the challenge for a Habermas-inspired empirical research program.

## V. CONCLUSION

To conclude then, let me emphasize that this research program will have a hard time getting much of a hearing in this country – especially by journalists. It directly challenges the First Amendment fundamentalism that holds that the state has been and always will be the greatest enemy to press freedom. Paul Starr, Edwin Baker and others have shown the ways in which journalistic autonomy is in fact buoyed and supported by the State. It's not a question of State or no State, of repressive policies or no policies at all. It's a question of what kind of enabling policies are most likely to maximize the democratic qualities of the media system – by correcting or supplementing what is being produced by the current market-driven media system operating under the current policy environment.

I'll conclude with just one example.



Until recently, the best of American mainstream journalism has been guaranteed by a handful of wealthy families who have treated their newspapers as sacred trusts. This trust has been abandoned, successively, by the family owners of the *Los Angeles Times* – and just in the past few weeks, of the *Wall Street Journal*. Independent family ownership remains rather tenuously in place at the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.

Despite their economic problems, I doubt very much that the owners or journalists at the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* are eager for government policies to help them – let alone the help of sociologists.

But maybe it's time to ask ourselves whether so much power to decide the quality and the reach and diversity of news should be left to the benevolence – or ultimately the desire to cash in – of a few wealthy families.

There is certainly a place for the kind of journalism produced by our best privately-owned media. But leaving it all to the wisdom or the luck of the market is not enough. I am suggesting that media sociology's next frontier is eminently practical – we need to focus our energies on studying the institutional and policy configurations that move us closer to the ideals of deliberative democracy – and then use that knowledge to support and promote the kind of media voices that are missing in the current system.

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