

Public Journalism:  
Theoretical considerations of “the public” in politics  
and the role of journalism

By Barbara Myers

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*"Invent the printing press and democracy is inevitable."*

Carlyle, quoted in *The Public and its Problems*.

John Dewey could have penned the call for public journalism. To Dewey the revitalization of a rich and vibrant democracy, already in decline from his 1920s perspective, was predicated on "the public" finding and identifying itself as a cognizant, engaged community. Dewey saw communication, explicitly the process of debate, discussion and persuasion, as central to that end. Authentic "public opinion" could only arise out of effective and organized critical inquiry. The public envisioned by Dewey was cognizant and activist, empowered through collective action to place its demands on the state.

Two of his successors in thought, Jurgen Habermas and James Carey, continue and expand on Dewey, each with distinct views that likely reflect the particularities of their social history.

Public journalism predicates its practice on Dewey, Habermas and Carey's thesis that the crisis of modern democracy is inextricably woven with the decline of the public and of its advocate, the press. Public journalism gathered momentum in the early 1990s, popping up in diverse locales in response to the insider political spectacle of the 1988 presidential election and to a chorus of calls from academia and beyond that democracy was in crisis. Jay Rosen, an academic, and Davis "Buzz" Merritt, editor of the *Wichita Eagle*, have taken leading roles, encouraging editors and news-people to re-think their convictions and transform the culture and ideology of journalism. Their movement aims to revitalize the public, resuscitating journalism in the process. Schudson (1999) credits public journalism with stirring the highest level of journalism critique and self-analysis in a generation.

This review will focus on the works of Dewey, Carey and Habermas that form the theoretical core of public journalism. It will look further to the critical assessments of public journalism, considering the implications of Nancy Fraser and Douglas Kellner's critiques of Habermas, Hans Kleinsteuber's critique of Habermas which offers a German perspective and the criticism of public journalism put forward by Theodore Glasser, Peter Parisi, Tanni Haas and Linda Steiner, Anthony Eksterowicz, Robert Roberts and Adrian Clark, James Compton, Howard Tumber, and Michael Schudson. The review will not attempt to consider the day-to-day practice of public journalism.

### **The idea of the public**

In the discussion of public journalism, all roads lead back to Dewey. A Pragmatist, Dewey was one of the leading Progressive Era thinkers whose contributions to education, communication and

social/political theory still resonate decades later. Rosen and Merritt invoke Dewey in their justification for public journalism. And though he makes little mention of it, Habermas was clearly influenced by Dewey. But Dewey didn't originate the idea of "the public".

Carey (2007) relates Robert Darnton's description of the tree of Cracow where early 18<sup>th</sup> century Parisians gathered to hear and debate the latest gossip from early "news mongers". This was a new phenomenon, mirrored in Germany, England and the United States, that grew with the empowerment of a propertied non-royal class. Kleinsteuber (2007) contends that broad academic discussion of the public dates back 200 years in Germany, a long tradition pre-dating Habermas. In one cogent example, Kleinsteuber cites, the work of Hohendahl concerning the public required a fifty page bibliography.

So, it is fair to conclude that the concept of "the public" or the "public sphere" is not a new idea put forward by Dewey, Habermas or Carey. In a sense, the oldness of the idea and its loss of currency in modern thought are at the heart of the analysis of all three thinkers. They concur that the nearly lost arts of vibrant public discourse, argument and consensus building on the part of the public are distinguishing features of democracy both in Europe and the United States. And all conclude that the decline of the public sphere is the core problem for democracy.

### **John Dewey – The Public and its Problems**

Dewey's conception of democracy is rooted in the local, in face-to-face interchange that actively involves the citizenry at every level of association. In *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), Dewey's salvo to Walter Lippman's *Public Opinion*, Dewey calls for development from the "Great Society" to a "Great Community". To this end, Dewey holds that only communication can achieve the "clear consciousness of a communal life" required (p. 142).

Communication then is democracy's pre-requisite. In Dewey's view, public opinion is predicated on effective and organized social inquiry communicated to the wider society. Without communication, inquiry loses its value. To Dewey, understanding must be shared, communicated, to be true knowledge. He relegates the unshared knowledge of experts to the vanity of an unconnected elite. And Dewey cautions that inquiry must be continuous, connected and persistent to guard against what he calls "false opinion".

It is striking to consider Dewey's concern, from his 1927 perspective, that new technologies, specifically the telephone, telegraph and radio, had outstripped the content of the news. He thought that news, as it had already evolved, was overly reliant on the sensational and failed to provide a historical context that would give texture and understanding of the social consequences of the news. Devoid of social meaning, the news could titillate but not provide depth of understanding, again the

pre-requisite for democratic thought and action. In turn, the consumers of news became spectators rather than informed participants.

### **Habermas – The Public Sphere and Structural Transformation**

Habermas (1974)<sup>1</sup> puts forward his thesis that the public sphere<sup>2</sup> where citizens confer freely to form public opinion, mediates between society and the state. It is the public sphere and the pressure of public opinion that insure democracy. Crucially, Habermas recognizes that “public opinion” presupposes a “reasoning” public. The Holocaust exemplifies the consequences of an unreasoning public, a public motivated by what Dewey would have called “false opinion”. Dewey expanded on this point when he cautioned against equating that which is public with the socially useful, reminding the reader that war is a regular activity of the politically organized.

Habermas puts democracy and the rise of the public sphere into historical and social context, placing them as consequences of the demise of feudal monarchies and the rise of bourgeois society. He also discusses 20<sup>th</sup> century historical changes in the public sphere (structural transformations), noting that as it has become less socially exclusive, that is admitting people from all classes, it has lost social cohesion and become prone to conflict between competing interests. His prognosis for Western civilization is dire – “The communicative network of a public made up of rationally debating citizens has collapsed.”

In a 2004 commemorative lecture, Habermas commented on the personal influences that drew him to the field of philosophy and social theory. Habermas turned sixteen a few months after the end of the WWII, having “the good fortune to be born late” as the Germans refer to those young enough to have avoided complicity in the Holocaust. He was too young to have been drafted by the Wehrmacht, but old enough to fully appreciate what he calls “a rupture of civilization” as the world became cognizant of Auschwitz and the other death camps. This early confrontation with Germany’s Nazi heritage and Habermas’ later politicization, circa 1953, as he came to appreciate the enduring authoritarianism in German thought<sup>3</sup>, cemented his interest in the political public sphere. He began his theoretical work in the late 50s working as Theodor Adorno’s research assistant at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research which he credits with providing a framework for incorporation of democratic ideas from America, France and England and for deeper consideration of

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<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Habermas’ The public sphere: An encyclopedia article articulates the philosophy elaborated in his longer, most renowned work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, published in 1962 and translated into English in 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Öffentlichkeit in German. For an interesting expansion on the German concept, see Kleinsteuber.

<sup>3</sup> Especially he says as expressed by Martin Heidegger.

Germany's failure to establish democracy. His preoccupation with democracy and the centrality of public opinion formation would inform his extraordinarily prolific life's work.

### **James Carey**

*"The vast growth of the social, steadily encroaching on both public and private life, has produced the eerie phenomenon of mass society, which rules everybody anonymously, just as bureaucracy, the rule of no one, has become the modern form of despotism."* Mary McCarthy (1958) quoted by Carey in "The press, public opinion and public discourse" (1995).

It is easy to argue for James Carey as the logical successor to John Dewey. Carey's tremendous intellect and eagerness to integrate diverse disciplines in an intricately woven, American dyed and politically progressive analysis seems intrinsically Deweyan. Unlike Habermas, Carey doesn't hesitate to credit Dewey as his source of intellectual inspiration.

Carey brings an artist's perspective to the toughest political and social questions, simultaneously steeping his theory in historical analysis. In "A short history of journalism for journalists", Carey (2007) differentiates between news and reportage, which have historically documented daily life in one form or another (including fable, legend, parable and song), and journalism, which is a product of democratic society. Journalism as it rose up in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century was predicated on new "means of production" and the appearance of "the public".

His definition of the public as the sphere between the state and private life is closely aligned with both Dewey and Habermas. While acknowledging its historical restriction by race, class and gender, Carey calls the public "the god term of journalism". (1987, p.5).

Carey's description of the birth of democracy in pre-revolutionary Philadelphia, where the issues of the day were hotly debated in the *pub* by *publicans* who *published* accounts of the debates in our earliest newspapers brings the imagery of the early public and its dependence upon the news into vivid focus (1995, p.385). Carey poses the news as dialectic – as the source of controversy to be debated in the *pub* and as a subsequent account of that debate. As such it is intricately connected to the public. "The public was activated into a social relation by the news and, in turn, the primary subject of the news was the public." (1995, p.381)

Carey adds to the theory of the public his interpretation of the 1<sup>st</sup> amendment, which he sees as a declaration of the rights of the public, not of individuals. The rights of assembly, free speech and the press are designed to protect the viability of the public sphere, with individual rights secondary to the right of discourse. The fourth element, freedom of religion, insures the participation of the historically excluded (2007, p.14, 1995, p.383).

The industrial revolution laid the conditions for the rise of the progressive movement that found its spokesmen in the muckraking

press, self-proclaimed representatives of the people against the plutocracy. Their decidedly partisan take on the news was intended to outrage and spur citizen action (Carey, 1995). The sway of the muckrakers in journalism would be short-lived as the partisan press was supplanted by the ideal of objectivity and journalism was "depoliticized" (1995, p. 390).

Carey repeats the story of Lippmann's argument with Dewey in several articles, concluding that Lippmann, whose position eclipsed Dewey's and won the day, "took the public out of politics and politics out of public life", simultaneously stripping politics and its analysis from journalism (1989 p. 273, 1999 p. 390). Carey sees Lippmann's reliance on experts and denigration of the average citizen as quintessentially anti-democratic. Always interested in the poetry of prose, Carey paints a picture of the public and the news eternally intertwined. Once estranged from one another, both spiral down, carrying democracy with them.

An understandable pessimism had seeped into Carey's thesis by 1995 when his essay, "The press and public discourse" (1987) was expanded and re-titled "The press, public opinion and public discourse" (1995). He pondered whether it was already too late for democracy, whether the public could be sufficiently resuscitated in the context of the "ruthlessly privatizing forces of capitalism" (1995, pp.373-374). His use of the quote from Mary McCarthy (above) to open the second article is perhaps the best summation of his view of the socio-political effect of bureaucratization under monopoly capitalism.

One man, one vote under the supervision of a watchdog press is an insufficient view of democracy for Carey and Dewey. Rather they envision a public of political activists energized by journalism of substance.

Carey sees public journalism as a "reawakening of an antecedent tradition of journalism and politics" (1999, p.63). While he makes brief mention of its limitations, conceding that its successes are "local and erratic", he holds it out as the best alternative currently in practice.

### **Rosen and Merritt**

Dewey and Carey's direct influence on public journalism is well acknowledged. Jay Rosen, widely recognized as the academic half of the Rosen-Merritt public journalism leadership duo, wrote his dissertation on the Lippman-Dewey conflict of the 1920s and credits Carey with bringing recognition of the importance of Dewey's position back into discussion (Merritt and Rosen, 1995). His acknowledgement of Habermas is less direct, though clearly discernable in his bibliographies (1991 and 1994). The significance of Habermas shouldn't be underestimated. Glasser and Craft note that academics from diverse fields writing about the decline of democratic dialogue in the 90s, including Carey, Christians, Ferre and Fackler, Peters & Cmiel and Rosen, all "pay an intellectual debt" to Habermas (1996, p. 155).

Rosen sees public journalism as a 1990s rendition of Dewey's original concerns, placing journalists on the right side of the Lippman-Dewey debate (1995, p.55). He rejects photo op journalism that co-opts the journalist, making him or her complicit in the diminishment of journalistic inquiry and making the citizen a spectator rather than a participant. He calls the idea of a participating, deliberating public a moral demand.

In "Imagining public journalism", Rosen (1995) quotes a short passage from Michael Herr's Vietnam reportage, *Dispatches*; "...it took the war to teach it, that you were responsible for everything you saw, as you were for everything you did." (p. 56). Rosen provides an elliptical interpretation of the passage but the implication seems obvious – journalists have the moral obligation to recognize their attachment, not detachment, to society and to take a stand for what is morally right. He extends that moral responsibility to academics in "Making things more public: On the political responsibility of the media intellectual" (1994).

Buzz Merritt (1995), editor of the *Wichita Eagle*, came to public journalism as a veteran with 34 years in a culture he says had "lost its bearings". The 1988 presidential campaign forced him to conclude that something had to change. He wrote an editorial the next week announcing his decision.

Like Rosen, his ideas echo Dewey and Carey and the other thinkers who influenced him like Dionne and Yankelovich. He says that; the public and journalism are "inextricably bound", that information alone is insufficient sustenance for the public, that the credo of detachment has caused journalism to lose credibility with the public, and that public journalism endeavors "to re-engage citizens in public life" (pp. 43-45).

Merritt confronts the objectivity/detachment credo calling for a fundamental change in journalism's self-concept. He contends that it is disingenuous for journalists to purport to be value neutral and contends that this false façade might account in part for public distrust. He takes the concept further noting that detachment breeds arrogance and "self granted immunity" as the journalist becomes detached from the consequences of his/her choices (p.42).

He brings a practical voice to the discussion, noting that it is easier to call for change than to affect it. In "Missing the Point", he asks critics to consider not HOW they did it, but WHY, contending that the first task is to get the philosophical essence of public journalism (1996, p.30).

### **Criticism of Habermas and Dewey**

It is useful to consider some of the criticisms of Habermas and Dewey as many of them are applicable to consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of public journalism theory and practice.

Though critical of Habermas' model, Douglas Kellner (2000) considers *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* one of the most influential books of the second half of the twentieth century (an idea widely shared by academics) and a strong theoretical basis for understanding contemporary society (p. 1/17).<sup>4</sup> In a contrarian view, Kleinstauber (2007) contends that discussion of Habermas has gone out of fashion in Europe where Habermas is considered just one of many theorists who continue to debate the subject.

In support of his contention that Habermas' interest in questions of democracy date to the start of his career, Kellner describes an early project (1961) that looked at the political opinions and political potential of German students in the context of a norm described as "authentically democratic political participation". The results had to be sobering. Habermas found only 4% of the students could be termed "genuinely democratic" and only 9% demonstrated democratic potential (pp. 1-2/17).

*Structural Transformation* followed in relatively short order. Kellner posits that *Structural Transformation* should be considered in relation to the Frankfurt School's analytical model of the transition from market capitalism and liberal democracy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to a stage of state and monopoly capitalism in which discussion, debate and consensus (i.e. democracy) are replaced by mass cultural consumption (pp. 2-7/17). In this context, Kellner argues that, though imperfect, Habermas' model serves as a normative concept for democracy (p. 2/17). While Kellner goes on to criticize the idealization inherent in Habermas' conception of the bourgeois public sphere (p. 6/17), this normative model has provided grist for the mill that has occupied theoretical minds for nearly 50 years since its publication. Along the same line, Kellner describes Habermas' intellectual journey as a search for a "re-democratization of radical social theory" predicated on Habermas' idea that both the Frankfurt school and traditional Marxism had underestimated the "principles of universal law, rights and sovereignty" (p. 2/17).

In this normative frame, Habermas contrasts the formation of public opinion in the bourgeois public sphere, characterizing it as the result of political debate and consensus, with that of modern capitalism, "where public opinion is formed by dominant elites" and thus represents their private interests. Citizens are relegated to the role of passive spectators in this scenario, not active decision makers, echoing Dewey's conception (p. 4/17).

Kellner goes on to take a critical look at deficiencies in Habermas' work, raising a series of interrelated and vital questions. According to Kellner, Habermas is much less interested than Dewey in an active role for the media in the public sphere.

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<sup>4</sup> Kellner thinks Habermas' *Structural Transformation* thesis provides a better theoretical basis for analysis of contemporary society than his later thinking on language and communication which Kellner sees limiting the public's power to communication and an influential role with decision making bodies.



While Habermas calls for "a critical process of public communication", Kellner thinks Habermas fails to formulate a role for the media and neglects the potential normative power of the media. Kellner says Habermas omits the role of an informed and intellectually competent citizenry and the role of education and the media in fostering community knowledge (p. 10-12/17). Kellner, like Dewey and Carey, sees the media as part of the constitutional balance of power as indicated by the 4<sup>th</sup> estate moniker.

While acknowledging the normative effect of Habermas' idealization of the bourgeois public sphere, Kellner doubts, with good reason, that 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century public debate was as rational as depicted and concludes that Habermas over idealized the bourgeoisie and mistakenly conceived of a unitary public sphere. *Structural Transformation* ignores the fact that bourgeois 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century politics were dominated by white, propertied men. Kellner notes that in response to criticism from Negt and Kluge for neglect of plebian and proletarian public spheres, Habermas later corrected his thesis, incorporating the concept of "colliding publics" representing the working and bourgeois classes. Kellner goes on to say that the public sphere should be conceived as a "multiplicity" of spheres, an idea fleshed out more fully by Fraser (p. 5/17).

Importantly, Kellner thinks that Habermas downplays the vitality of the public sphere, citing in particular the civil rights movement and other 1960's movements. Though he doesn't mention it, the anti-war movement would also be applicable (p.6/17).

Kellner ends with a discussion of expansion of the public sphere in cyberspace, an area that he thinks Habermas mistakenly neglects, missing its tremendous potential for democratization. He acknowledges that cyberspace remains contested space, with the potential to invigorate democracy or be used for reactionary ends (pp. 12-13/17).

Antonio and Kellner (1992) take on a detailed comparative analysis of Dewey and Habermas that provides some insight to Dewey's influence on the later theorist. Of note for the purposes of this paper, they say that Habermas is the only Frankfurt School critical theorist to incorporate pragmatism. They quote his view in Dewey (1986) of "American pragmatism as the third productive reply to Hegel, after Marx and Kierkegaard" (cited in footnote 1). Habermas acknowledges a limited influence of Dewey, saying that Dewey's progressive philosophy of education was significant to his own education and world-view (cited in footnote 1). This seems an understatement considering the similar threads of thought evident on the intersection of democracy and the public. Perhaps Antonio and Kellner's strongest criticism of Habermas is that while he approaches an "anchoring (of) critical theory in pragmatic testing", he ultimately stops short of a full engagement with pragmatism.

Antonio and Kellner conclude that Dewey and Mead offer a broader, more multi-dimensional theory of communication and social

relations than Habermas. They are apparently attracted to Dewey's progressive activism and "Jeffersonian emphasis on participation", finding Habermas' stance relatively defensive in comparison. They conclude that his failure to adequately discuss participation indicates a narrowly conceived view of democratic potential and of the ability of individuals to affect change (pp. 15-16/17).

Kleinsteuber agrees with Antonio and Kellner that Habermas limits his democratic demands to the realm of political debate in *Structural Transformation*, thus maintaining accepted German decorum and not raising the challenge of direct participatory democracy. He parts with Antonio and Kellner with his contention that viewing the centrality of democracy in *Structural Transformation* is a misreading of Habermas.

Kleinsteuber relates Habermas' influence in Germany more to Habermas' active participation in the feuilleton, described as a special section of the "high class" press where leading thinkers offer their opinions, than to his theoretical work. He credits Habermas' employment of the feuilleton with stimulating controversy for decades over the historiography of Nazi crimes. In the theoretical realm, he does grant Habermas credit for his understanding that structural change could occur gradually and not always entail revolution as assumed by Marxist theorists.

In criticism of Dewey, Antonio and Kellner point out that in his emphasis on consensual solutions, Dewey doesn't confront the problems of intractable issues like racism and that he doesn't adequately consider the material or economic basis of conflicts (p. 17/17). Antonio and Kellner conclude with the suggestion that an integrated view of the resources of pragmatism (Dewey), interactionism, and critical theory (Habermas) could heighten the discussion of modern democracy (p. 17/17).<sup>5</sup>

### **Fraser's critique – Issues of Race, Class and Gender**

Nancy Fraser (1990) calls Habermas' theoretical work on the limitations of democracy and conception of the public sphere indispensable and begins with an example that quickly pulls her assertion into focus. She points out that Marxist theory's equation of the interests of the socialist state with the interests of its citizens, lends "ballast to processes whereby the socialist vision became institutionalized in an authoritarian statist form instead of in a participatory democratic form. The result has been to jeopardize the very idea of socialist democracy." (p. 56)

In comment – the importance of her argument can't be overstated. With the Soviet Union dissolved and China embracing market

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<sup>5</sup> If space allowed, a discussion of the relationship of Dewey and the Chicago School to the Frankfurt School would be of interest. I thought it was noteworthy that Dewey was an original founder of the New School which became a refuge for theorists from the Frankfurt School during the war.

capitalism but not democratization, Fraser's analysis addresses the heart of the failure of Communism. The collective political might of the public spheres in these countries powered revolutionary change. But their revolutions didn't demand rights for the public. Instead their concept, democratic centralism, relied on decision making by the Communist Party elite. In failing to protect their own interests through a democratic process, through the concerted activity of the public sphere, both publics lost the power to influence and direct the state. Fraser talks here about socialist democracy, but the same argument would theoretically hold true for capitalist democracy with recognition of all its particularities.

In contrast, Fraser says, Habermas' "public sphere", provides a conceptual resource that helps delineate the interests of the state, market and democratic associations, a distinction essential to democratic theory (p. 57). While acknowledging Habermas' tremendous contribution, Fraser concludes that his omissions undermine the normative value of his theory (p. 77).

Fraser sees discourse in Habermas' bourgeois public sphere as the expression of the emerging power elite – an elite that consisted entirely of white propertied men (pp.60-61). That new power elite, by definition, came into contest with other societal forces. Fraser's notable and much referenced addition to the widely held critical assessment that Habermas idealized the public sphere, is that Habermas also failed to recognize and analyze competing public spheres. She calls these "counterpublics" to encapsulate the concept of their competition with the bourgeois public sphere.

Her model has multiple "discursive arenas" in a "societal context pervaded by structural relations of dominance and subordination". (p.65) Institutional inequality puts minority or less powerful publics – women, racial and sexual minorities and the working class – at a distinct disadvantage. Since full equality of participation is unattainable in stratified societies, Fraser suggests that parity is better reached in arrangements that promote contestation among multiple competing publics. She calls the publics formed by subordinated groups or classes, sub-(for subordinate) altern-(for alternative) counter-(for competing)publics, subaltern counterpublics (pp. 66-67)

Through "discursive contestation" of these publics, subordinated groups have the potential to have their concerns addressed. She gives the example of domestic violence, an issue deemed private before the women's movement made it a public concern (p. 71).

Fraser is widely referenced for her contribution to critical theory. And her concerns are clearly relevant to public journalists as they engage communities in problem solving and community building efforts. Taani Haas and Linda Steiner (2001) applied Fraser's theory to public journalism, looking at its practice in the Akron Beacon Journal's Pulitzer Prize winning project, "A Question of Color".

Haas and Steiner argue that by avoiding social inequalities, Habermas expects citizens to treat each other as social equals, a view that doesn't jive with the reality of communities fragmented by class and race differences. Applying Fraser's theory, they argue that journalists should encourage people to openly discuss social inequality (pp. 130-132). They reference Hackett and Zhao's position that public journalism scholars "overestimate the possibility... of community consensus, because [they] overlook the extent of conflicting interests and standpoints." (1998 in Haas and Steiner, 1990, p. 127)

Their analysis of the Akron Beacon Journal's work revealed the shortcomings of Habermas' unitary sphere concept in practice. Journalists failed to adequately recognize the widely disparate views held by the white and black communities and assumed that Akron's racial divide was the result of a lack of communication (p. 129). While Haas and Steiner recognize the insufficiency of glossing over social differences, they go on to conclude that the Beacon Journal could have "provided white and black residents with designated sections – distinctive discursive domains – in which to present their particular positions in their own words." (p. 133) This idea is strikingly outlandish, particularly considering our legacy of segregation. But it underscores the difficulty of taking a sound theoretical idea and putting it into practice. It also throws into question the role that journalists are taking on in the name of public journalism.

James Compton (2000) also expands on Fraser, quoting Heller's conclusion that "Habermas is compelled to disregard the whole motivational system of human beings" (cited in Compton, p. 453). Compton posits that Habermas' ideal speech model "addresses reason itself, not socially situated subjects" (p. 459) In addition to the conflicts of class, race and gender, Compton raises some of the behavioral impediments to discourse – coercion, lying, deception and plain old irrationality (p. 456). Based on this criticism of Habermas, Compton suggests a reframing of the public journalism debate that incorporates a more realistic model for discourse.

### **The Objectivity/Advocacy dilemma**

While Rosen and Merritt reject the objectivity/detachment credo of traditional journalism, a substantial body of constructive criticism considers public journalism more within the credo than outside it.

The title of a short article by Theodore Glasser sums up his view of journalistic detachment – "Objectivity Precludes Responsibility" (1984). Glasser doesn't equivocate. "Objectivity in journalism effectively erodes the very foundation on which rests a responsible press." (p. 14) – These are fighting words to a nearly century old tradition of news objectivity. Glasser's call for journalism that provides critical perspective and a cognizance of the consequences of reportage draws from both Dewey and Carey. He quotes Dewey – "Our chief moral business is to

become acquainted with the consequences." (p.16). To do otherwise, in Glasser's view, is inherently conservative and supportive of the status quo (p. 13).

Which gets to his criticism of public journalism. In Glasser and Craft's view, rejection of press objectivity means an endorsement of partisan advocacy, a leap public journalism hasn't taken. Here, Merritt's "neutrality on specifics" (cited by Glasser) amounts to a commitment to facilitate debate, a procedural role, without connection to its consequences (1998, p. 207). Taking the issue to its logical conclusion, Glasser questions what the press should do when community consensus calls for book burning or when the popular vote elects a racist mayor. Echoing Fraser and Compton, he says that avoidance of partisan interests disregards the realities of political power (1999, p. 9-10).

The realities of political power are at the crux of this debate. Carey's view of the news as a rendition of the daily power drama that engages the reader, encouraging their identification and participation, aligns with Glasser's (Carey, 1989, p. 20). There can be no objectivity in the drama of the oppressor/oppressed. Glasser holds that a non-partisan, apolitical press leading public debate can only bring about an "illusion of reform" and participation if it doesn't challenge vested interests (p. 10).

Eksterowicz et al (1998) bring in another perspective through their look at objectivity in the context of a comparative historical analysis of public and muckraking journalism. While cognizant of the differences between muckraking and public journalism, they also see relevant points of intersection. Both have arisen in periods of upheaval. Both intend to energize citizen participation. They conclude that to counter political ignorance, the press must replace the passivity of objective journalism with the "aggressive, critical, civic-oriented journalism that characterized the Progressive Era" (pp. 85-86).

### **Agenda Setting and Framing**

The question of objectivity is of course central to agenda setting and framing, which McCombs et al have called second level agenda setting (cited in Scheufele, 1999, p. 116).

Peter Parisi (1997) formulates the central critical concern that public journalists abdicate their agenda setting role allowing "the local community's conceptual horizons" to frame the news agenda (p. 675). While he lauds public journalism's concern with its democratic role, Parisi thinks it only partially addresses Dewey's original thesis and sees a more active role for the journalist. He thinks that in the Dewey tradition, a "true" public journalist is responsible for "organizing a wider range of views than the community itself produces" (p. 681). Community views alone cannot set the news agenda. In Parisi's view, the job of framing, of creating a dynamic narrative, remains the journalist's.

Parisi shares company in this idea with Glasser and Craft (1996, p. 156 and 1998, p. 211), Edmund Lambeth (1998, p. 28), Schudson

(p. 119), and Compton, to name a few. Lambeth questions whether in taking their cues from the public, public journalists "focus the intelligence and energy of citizenry on the community's most serious problems." Compton posits that instead of emphasizing the conflict of competing interests, public journalism frames stories with Rosen's "values of conversation, participation and deliberative dialogue" (p. 455). Glasser and Craft propose that public journalists publicly engage the debate on journalism's role and responsibility in agenda setting (1996, p. 156). Of all the debates that could be initiated by journalists, this one seems the most pertinent.

### **Media control and market imperatives**

Compton, along with Glasser and Craft, confronts the thorny question of media ownership and control. Compton holds that public journalism hasn't confronted the reality raised by Dewey, Habermas and Carey – the corrupting influence of money and power. He says, "the goals of public journalism are presented as *if* they are compatible with the market. *That is the problem of public journalism*" (original emphasis, p. 460). Compton has a salient point. Why should media owners promote discourse that could hurt the bottom line?

Glasser and Craft elaborate on the problem of advertising (p. 213). Effectively, the economic model for newspapers has been content subsidization by advertisers in search of relatively affluent consumers. With an eye to their market, ownership interests are likely to conflict with the interests of the "multiplicity of public spheres" that should be engaged by public journalism. Who will be willing to subsidize truly public content? For now, content is at ever greater risk.

Howard Tumber (2001) raises some interesting points on how the diminution of the news feeds on itself and impacts political systems. He discusses the drastic curtailment of newsgathering which he aptly describes as a "retreat from the world"; the transformation of quality broadsheets into papers that increasingly look like their tabloid competitors; and a rise in the spectacle of scandal posing as news. Scandal has become big business. With the public more engaged with the activities of personalities and less engaged with issues and with politicians and governments ever more reliant on public relations and information management, the potential for scandal and innuendo to bring down a politician is ever greater. The media then can become the tool of political power struggles, further eroding its legitimacy as a check on power.

It is important to add that Tumber places the rise of scandal news firmly in the context of the crisis of democracy with an emphasis on media conglomeration, globalization and the impact of the digital revolution.

### **Normative theory**

Glasser and Craft conclude that public journalism has failed to articulate a solid theoretical base for its work. Public journalism proponents lack agreement on; what democracy means, where public life exists and what constitutes participation. Glasser and Craft characterize public journalism's stance as one of purposeful normative "disarray" (p. 214).

Along the same line, Schudson considers public journalism an essentially conservative movement that stops short of offering a new model. He says it "invokes the 'neighborhood of nostalgia'" and that "it fails to go beyond Dewey in developing a vision of what community, in 1997, not 1927, might be." (p.126)

### **The information age**

Though not a focus of this paper, the subject of the public cannot exclude mention of the potential for expansion of the public sphere in cyberspace, even as it has had a devastating effect on journalism as we know it. Carey, Tumber and Kellner each discuss the internet's possibility for expansion of the public sphere and the vital importance of harnessing its potential.

Tumber concludes with an attempt to find "notes of optimism within this bleak scenario" of media monopoly and the decline of journalistic interpretation of the news.

He ends with cautious optimism for the internet as the new public frontier; "The political struggle over control of cyberspace is at an early stage and the role played by journalism will be crucial in determining how the balance finally evolves" (p. 110).

### **Conclusion**

The public journalism movement has raised the level of discussion, reinvigorating an almost lost debate on the public and the role of journalism in democracy – a major accomplishment in and of itself. The movement's inclination to take inspiration from Dewey and his successors appears wisely taken.

Fraser is correct. Habermas' theoretical work, and by extension the work of Dewey and Carey, forms an indispensable theoretical base for contemplation of the challenges to modern democracy. How striking to consider that Dewey's concern about the substitution of scandal for news can be so eerily echoed nearly a century later by Tumber. In another example, Dewey's discussion of newswire service and the loss of analysis it entails presaged the discussion I had last week with the foreign news editor of a metropolitan daily who lamented that he has effectively become a wire news editor as his paper shrinks and teeters on the edge of bankruptcy. It seems uncanny, but of course, it really isn't. Dewey's historicism ensures the durability of his theory.

Certainly, conditions have changed. The problems of media, and generally industry, monopolization are vastly more acute than in

Dewey's day. We are in the midst of the newest technological revolution and are yet to fully grasp the implications of this massive shift in the means of production and in human communication. No one quite knows to what extent the public arena will convene in cyberspace rather than in the town square. But the essential dynamic relationship between the public, journalism and democracy holds. Our job is to figure out how to apply the concept to current conditions.

In short, we need a new conception of the public grounded in this historical moment. Some of the work has been done. The critical analysis of Fraser and some of her contemporaries adds specificity and modern particularity to the theory and expands on the historical analysis. Fraser's demand to consider minority or subordinated publics has been widely embraced and should perforce be considered an integral part of the theory. Antonio and Kellner and Compton appropriately call for analysis of the modern political economy. And Antonio and Kellner's suggestion to integrate the resources of pragmatism (Dewey), interactionism (the interaction of multiple disciplines), and critical theory (Habermas) could heighten the discussion of modern democracy. I would add Carey for his ritual view of communication and theoretical and historical contributions to the concept of the public.

Of course, the application of theory in practice can be a thornier matter as exemplified in the example of Haas and Steiner's critique of the Akron Beacon Journal's public journalism project.

Public journalism grasps that journalistic detachment has contributed to the rupture of journalism and the public. But their apparent ambivalence on the objectivity/advocacy question appears to be a major obstacle to re-engagement with the public. One can only wonder if their avoidance of direct advocacy is rooted in the fear they're trying to overcome – the fear of a "political" label. Public discourse, the very thing public journalism advocates, **IS** politics. Our acculturation to the idea that being "political" is a realm reserved for politicians who we distrust is at the heart of the dynamic that Dewey, Habermas and Carey decry. Of course, there is a practical aspect to sidestepping the advocacy issue. We all know that the "political" label is a difficult brand to overcome.

It is note-worthy in this regard, that some journalists have successfully expressed their advocacy, attracting a devoted audience. Rachel Maddow, though more a broadcaster than a journalist, comes to mind. As does Jon Stewart, whose unconventional and decidedly opinionated approach to the news provides the only source of news to an increasingly wide sector of the population.

The critics of public journalism have raised some indispensable concerns. I concur with Glasser and Craft's contention that the press has the responsibility to debate its own role. And I would argue that abandonment of its agenda setting role in favor of



public agenda setting is an overreaction. The potential consequences of this overreaction are dire. Dewey, Glasser and others correctly raise the concern of "false" opinion, the dangerous power of reactionary public opinion (read ideology) that has fueled the oppression of minorities, war and even genocide.

A more reciprocal model that sets up a dialectical relationship between the press and the public seems more in keeping with the theory discussed here. In this model, journalistic exposure to the public of "sustained inquiry" complete with analysis of contending forces combines with an active press effort to understand the public's concerns, fueling inquiry into new areas of study and exposé. This model is more protective of democracy than the public agenda setting model.

Can journalists re-invent the public? Is that the most appropriate view of their role? Here, again, I diverge from what appears to be public journalism's dominant practice. Instead of attempting to re-invent the public, perhaps an emphasis on re-inventing the content of journalism would be more appropriate to our task. Dewey called for a journalistic link to morality and sustained inquiry that exposes the forces at play, their self-interest and motivation. Likewise, Carey talked about the narrative imperative in journalism and the function of the press in providing not just information, but material for argument. Framing and content with meaning to people can incite public participation. To this end, public journalism should look closely at the tradition of muckraking for inspiration. Perhaps when journalism sheds its fear of the political, the public will be able to follow suit.

Schudson questioned whether the public is indeed dead, raising examples of public engagement that defy the analysis that public democracy is fully eclipsed. The recent election cycle which brought an explosion of public participation in the streets and on the internet, culminating in the election of Obama, is a strikingly hopeful sign that all is not over for the public.

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