

Guest Lecture at the University of Siegen
RADICALIZING THE HABERMASIAN PUBLIC SPHERE

Lincoln James Dahlberg
Journalism and Communications
University of Queensland

Abstract

The concept of the public sphere has become central to understanding the role of media in democratic societies. In particular, Jürgen Habermas' deliberative conceptualization of the public sphere has become influential in media and communication studies. Habermas understands the public sphere to be constituted by rational citizen deliberation, leading to critical-reflexive public opinion able to hold official decision makers accountable. However, Habermas' conceptualization has come under extensive critique, some of which has yet to be adequately taken into account. Most significantly, post-structuralist critiques that the deliberative conception does not fully account for power and exclusion continue to raise questions of the conceptions critical value. Here I examine these critiques and show that although the Habermasian public sphere pays more attention to power and exclusion than some critics argue, it does not adequately theorize the politics of exclusion associated with the defining of the boundary of deliberation, in both theory and practice. However, rather than discard the Habermasian public sphere conception, I 'radicalize', by which I mean reconceptualize it so as to account for the democratic role of the politics associated with excluded voices. The resources for addressing this problem are found in two different critical theoretic traditions: post-Marxist discourse theory (the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe being central), particularly discourse theory's understandings of discourse and radical democratic ethics; and counter-public sphere theory (in particular the work of Nancy Fraser) and the conception of counter-publics. By articulating discourse, radical democratic ethics, and counter-publics, I am able to conceive of a radical democratic public sphere that accounts for the politics of exclusion and the democratic possibilities of such politics as well as the normative role of the media there-in. However, a significant question remains, developing out of political economy critique (most prominently that of Slavoj Žižek) of both Habermas and discourse theory, as to whether the posited radical public sphere conception is adequate for the realization of strong democracy in the context of globalization. I conclude by exploring this question, answering it by drawing on discourse theory to deconstruct the culture/economy binary and drawing on contemporary media communications examples, particularly from digital networking, to illustrate the potential of a radical public sphere for democratization against the power of global capitalism.